

BEGINNING A NEW SERIALISED NOVEL

# SHELMERDINE

## BY MISS PRISCILLA LANGRIDGE

### CHAPTER I

#### WHICH BEGINS & ENDS ON A TRAIN

A **BODY** in motion tends to remain in motion.  
A body at rest tends to remain at rest.

Hurtling bullet-like down the passage of a steam train, it occurred to Shelmerdine Bingham that it was the latter which applied in her case. When she had dematerialised she had been at rest. She was still at rest now, as she rematerialised. The train, however, was not.

Her meditations were cut short by the inevitable collision. Fortunately it was with a man possessed of a fair degree of inbuilt cushioning.

"Your pardon, sister," said the man.

Shelmerdine was a great reader of eyes and of voices. Surreptitious enquiries were no doubt the most prudent at this stage. One had no idea of how ready they were to throw one into the loony bin in this era—whatever era it might be. But she saw in her man that she could speak freely and be humoured at least.

"Would you be so good as to tell me the date?" she asked.

"The third of May," said he.

"And the year?"

"Why, surely you know that."

"I fear not. I am a traveller in time. Perhaps you have read the works of Mr. Wells. From the look of this train I would guess some time in the 1890s, and yet some things do not fit."

"Hardly surprising. The year is 2014."

"And this is a steam train."

"Yes. May I ask from whence you come—or should I say, from when you come?"

"From 1991."

"And was it usual in 1991 for nuns to undertake expeditions in time?"

"Oh no. I am not a nun. This habit was a little idea of mine. You see I had no idea when I might arrive so it was impossible to dress for the occasion. I decided that a traditional nun's habit would not look out of place at any time over a span of a thousand years."

"Perhaps you are unaware that there are periods in our history when it would have got you arrested on sight, or worse."

"I am no historian, I'm afraid."

"Then you are very lucky."

"I know. I depend upon that. Perhaps too much at times."

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It is a lamentable tendency in most human beings to jump to irrational conclusions. To form judgements upon evidence which has no real bearing upon them.

Richard Masterson, the chap upon whom Shelmerdine had so forcefully impressed herself, was a case in point. When she disembarked from the train he was pondering deeply upon whether her story was the rot it seemed to be or not. On the one hand it seemed improbable. On the other, she was so young and seemed so sincere. When he examined his pockets and found them to have been picked clean, he became certain that the whole business was a low and despicable fabrication.

His reasoning was, of course, quite false, as was his conclusion. A time traveller is as capable as anyone else of picking pockets, and may, indeed, have better reasons for doing so.

Not that I would urge this last point in Shelmerdine's defence. She seldom required any good reason to perform a dishonest act. In fact only the most pressing of reasons would prevent her.

She left the station, staring bemusedly about her. The most surprising thing was the change in costume. She was seventeen and had lived in an era when the street-wear of the average person had scarcely changed at all in her whole lifetime. Jeans and tee shirts had endured among the young as if preserved in amber for so many years that it seemed inconceivable that the style might ever change. Of course, there were new fads every other years but so far as the solid everyday dress of every age and class was concerned, Shelmerdine had lived in one of the most conservative periods of earth's history. Yet now, a mere twenty-five years on, all these immutable

things had vanished. It was a shock.

It was not just the clothes themselves—the long, tight skirts, the pointed epaulette-collars which extended inches beyond each shoulder, the sharp, bobbed hairstyles, the lace blouses and seamed stockings—a mixture of the conventionally "futuristic" and the primly old-fashioned. No, startling as these things might have been, much more startling was the way they were worn. They were not casual. They were not worn in invisible inverted commas. They were formal clothes worn by people who could hardly conceive of informal clothes. They were the clothes of people who, in some way that Shelmerdine could not yet formulate, took themselves seriously.

There was very little motor transport and quite a bit of horse-drawn transport. The streets seemed clean and cared for in a way that was not usual in her day. There were many old stone and brick buildings, but few of the kind that she was accustomed to consider "modern". Presumably they had existed at some time. If so, where had they gone?

A newspaper vendor cried his wares. "New Earl of Wessex: Stratton Park released." Shelmerdine glanced at a paper to confirm the year she had been told. It was correct.

She weighed the situation in her mind. The air was clean. The place seemed civilised. She was not in imminent danger of being murdered. In all, it was good. Of course, she was stranded here, knowing nobody, owning nothing, without a place to rest her head; but that had been the deal from the beginning. If she could not play herself out of a situation like that, then she was not the girl she thought herself. At any rate, it was a great deal better than being in a reform school, or whatever grooshy euphemism they used for the places in 1991.

The bank was panelled in dark wood and without glass enclosures or other obvious security devices. Shelmerdine presented the small engraved card of which she had imperceptibly relieved a customer at the door.

"I should like to withdraw five thousand creds."

The austere young bank clerk raised an eyebrow or two above the gold rim of her spectacles. "And what, leaving aside the question of the doubtful taste of impersonating a nun in order to perpetrate these inanities, might a cred be?"

Really these people were insufferable. Surely any one knew that the currency of the

future was called creds. Had they never read a comic? "Creds. Credits, you know", explained Shelmerdine with exaggerated care.

"Sounds like something you get on your school report," said the clerk, "or rather you don't and you have come here for some; but this is a bank, you know."

"Now listen, I didn't come here for any of your cheek. What did it mean when I saw a dress in a shop marked '100 Cr.?'?"

"That the dress was priced at a hundred crowns, or twenty five pounds, I shouldn't wonder. But do cut along. I have some grown-up customers to attend to. I'm sure your maths mistress can do money sums with you."

There seemed little for it but to cut along. One could hardly use the bank card after having drawn so much attention to oneself.

Acquiring a little ready cash seemed politic at this point. As she left the bank, Shelmerdine passed a tall woman wearing a long black overcoat. Her face had rather a masculine cut and a vague, abstracted expression. Possibly the word "abstracted" suggested something to Shelmerdine, for her light, swift fingers dipped the woman's inside breast pocket. Now the inside breast pocket is the easiest pocket to dip and Shelmerdine was a rare mistress of the art. It was something she did almost without thinking and certainly without the smallest fear that her victim might detect it. It had simply never happened.

However, as Shelmerdine tried to walk away, at the same time slipping a small leather notecase into the folds of her habit, she found her wrist forcibly restrained by what felt like an iron ring that had closed about it. Looking, as one is apt to do under such circumstances, to discover the cause of her imprisonment, Shelmerdine saw that the woman had merely closed her forefinger and thumb about her wrist. With a swift jerk, Shelmerdine broke her captor's grip by forcing back the thumb. That, at any rate, was what she intended to do. In fact she succeeded only in hurting her wrist. The grip of this woman was quite inhuman.

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The woman strode briskly down the street as if scarcely aware that she had unwilling company in tow.

Shelmerdine, struggling to keep pace, muttered "If you do not release me I shall start screaming." If her captor heard her she gave no sign of it, and even the impetuous Shelmerdine decided not to carry out her threat. She was, after all, stranded in a world

of which she knew little, impersonating a nun and carrying three sets of stolen property. Any two of these things she might have felt competent to carry off, but the three in combination proved sufficiently daunting to persuade her to bide a little time and see what would happen next.

What did happen next was not, at first, unduly alarming. Shelmerdine was taken to a pleasant little cafe. When the waitress arrived, her hostess—if that be the proper term—motioned to Shelmerdine, who ordered a pot of tea and some scones. Her wrist remained in that relaxed yet unbreakable grip.

For the first time the Stranger spoke. Her voice was husky and clipped, with perhaps a trace of some foreign accent.

"I thought you might prefer to order since you have the money." On first finding her hand entrapped, Shelmerdine had instinctively passed the notecase into her other hand and concealed it beneath her habit. Somewhat abashed—or rather, as close to being abashed as she ever came, which was not very—she produced the well-worn leather and offered it to its owner.

"You are very skilful," said the latter. "Not one person in ten thousand could have detected your hand removing this. Very skilful, but a little unlucky."

"No," protested Shelmerdine. "I am not unlucky. I am quite unnaturally lucky. I always have been. I depend upon it."

"Then perhaps your encounter with me will turn out to be to your advantage after all."

"That is always a possibility."

The tea arrived.

"You could let me have my hand back now," suggested Shelmerdine. "I don't intend to run away."

"That is not correct. Running away is your precise intention." She opened her fingers about Shelmerdine's wrist. "But I warn you that you would not get more than three steps." She sat back in her chair. "Also when it seems convenient to you, you may return the banknotes you have abstracted from my notecase."

Shelmerdine produced the notes and the older woman opened the notecase for the first time to tuck them safely home, but hesitated before doing so.

"And now you cannot run away."

"Why do you say so?"

"Because if you did, no benefit would accrue to you from our meeting, and I think you are piqued to learn how this unusual encounter fits into the pattern of things. Am I not correct?"

Shelmerdine laughed. She did not often laugh. "Quite correct," she replied.

"But let us not be bound together by something as ordinary as money." With a neat flick of her fingers she sent the tight little fold of notes spinning across the table where it came to a rest in front of Shelmerdine. "My name is Vittoria Chess, and yours?"

"Shelmerdine Bingham."

"And where are you from, Mistress Bingham?"

"From the year 1991."

"Name three hit singles from that year."

"I am afraid I have taken no interest in such matters," answered Shelmerdine coldly. "Which, I suppose, leaves you in doubt of my *bona fides*."

"On the contrary. Your distaste is clearly unfeigned and could only belong to someone who has actually lived in the era in question.

"Now here is another matter upon which you may satisfy my curiosity. There are very few people in the world who could have dipped my pocket as lightly as you did. Even among professional pickpockets you are exceptional. How did you come by such a skill?"

"In my own era I worked with a stage magician. At some times he would tell members of the audience exactly what they had in their pockets. My part, of course, was to examine the contents beforehand. At other times he would cause personal effects of theirs to vanish and mysteriously produce them from a hat—"

"Forgive me, child, but that does not sound very probable to me. You are not the sort of girl who takes up employment with common conjurers."

"Not today, perhaps, but the 1980s were strange times. All sorts of people did all sorts of things. My family had seen better days and it was necessary for me to make use of my poor talents in whatever way I could."

"Oh, really, child. This isn't the age of Dickens even if we do have hansom cabs. Spare me your melodrama. It doesn't matter to me or anyone else what you did all those years ago. Why on earth do you bother with this rigmarole?"

Shelmerdine opened her mouth to answer, but was spared the trouble.

"Oh. I know perfectly well why. Sheer jinks, what? Never tell the truth if a lie will serve as well, eh? And if you can strike some preposterous pose and get away with it, so much the jollier. Well, it won't take with me, so you might as well tell the truth or at least a reasonable semblance of it."

Shelmerdine's nose wrinkled in an engaging laugh. "Oh, I am starting to like you! The truth—well, I suppose it might be novel. Yes, it was a bit of a taradiddle about the conjurer. But it was true that my family had fallen on hard times. Well, fairly true. We used to have a big place in Herefordshire, but what with taxes and so forth things weren't what they had been. We weren't remotely on the bread line.—I was going to quite a decent school but I didn't at all fancy any of the options open to me. Then one day I discovered that I had this remarkable talent. Do forgive me. I realise that I become rather stilted when I'm telling the truth."

"Not at all, it is rather fetching. So you felt that you had been dispossessed by society and consequently felt justified in robbing that society in return—in the person of any of its members you might happen to bump into?"

Shelmerdine considered this proposition for a moment. "Sounds quite deprived and psychological, doesn't it? D'you think it would be good for a remission?"

"That is hardly a matter of any importance, my dear. As I have said, nobody here will be concerned about the events of so many years ago, while in the present you shall not be resuming your old profession. As a matter of fact, I have a new occupation for you."

"Now look here, Vittoria—"

"Miss Chess, if you please."

"Now look here, Miss Chess, I don't remember agreeing to any proposition of yours. As a matter of fact it has always been a principle of mine never to engage in gainful employment of any sort."

"Then you need have no worries, my dear, for I do not intend paying you. I am going to send you to school. It is quite a nice school and I am sure you will enjoy yourself. There is a girl there by the name of Cara Leonie. I merely wish you to keep an eye on her for me."

"What sort of an eye? Am I supposed to be protecting her from something or preventing her from doing something or what?"

"Now it is you who appear to be regarding this affair as if it were some sort of contract of employment. I should not dream of employing you as some form of keeper or bodyguard. I am merely asking you to keep an eye on her. If anything occurs in connection with her that might be regarded as unusual you are to let me know. That is all."

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"And, if you will forgive my asking, what is my advantage in all this?"

"It will provide you with a place to stay, an opportunity to become accustomed to the

time in which you find yourself and some sort of background in this era when you leave. It is a perfect opportunity for one cast adrift, as it were, in a strange land as you are."

"Too perfect, Miss Chess. I might argue that it takes all the sport out of the thing: robs it of the element of adventure."

Miss Chess smiled. "I do not think you will find that, my dear. Very far from it."

"I suspect there is something that you are not telling me."

"Oh, come now, my child. There is very little that I *am* telling you. You have no idea who this Cara is or, come to that, who I am, or what you are watching for or why. To say that there is something I am not telling you seems an extraordinarily conservative way of stating the case."

Shelmerdine laughed again. "Yes, I *do* like you, Miss Chess. I'll do it. I don't promise to do it for long. If I am bored I may just disappear. But I'll do it. When do you want me to begin?"

"Well, there is no great hurry. We shall buy your uniform this afternoon, stay overnight in London and send you down to the school in the morning." The writer is tempted to say at this point that the afternoon passed swiftly in a whirl of activity; however, anyone who has been fitted for a school uniform and bought all the shoes, stockings, odds and etceteras that go with it will know that the process may be accused of many things, but passing swiftly is not one of them. In some ways the proceedings were enlivened for Shelmerdine by the novelty and fascination of the clothes. In many respects the light grey uniform was familiar enough, but the sharp waist and monstrous pointed collar of the blazer, for example, which jutted out along the shoulder like epaulettes, gave it an outlandish appearance.

"Ridiculous, isn't it?" agreed Miss Chess, seeming to read her thoughts, "but the style has invaded everything. This is quite a conservative concession to it. Anything less would look hopelessly dated."

The skirt was slim, tight and calf-length with a slight ruffled pleat beginning at the knee; the whole *ensemble* giving a slightly top-heavy appearance to Shelmerdine's eye.

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These things do come to an end. One eventually looks back on them, perhaps even making light of the ordeal. Shelmerdine was not quite at that stage when she sat across the table from Miss Chess, but the astonishing recuperative powers of the human frame were

already beginning to work their magic, aided not inconsiderably by an excellent dinner.

"I suppose you will not know where you wish to eat in the London of 2014," Miss Chess had said. "Of course I do," Shelmerdine had replied. "The Savoy."

"Things have changed so much," mused Shelmerdine over the main course.

"Yes," replied her companion. "It must be surprising to you. I remember your era very clearly. In fact, I am very nearly your own age in a manner of speaking—that is, I was born within a few years of you. It was not a time of great change. Curiously enough, people were continually saying that it was. But it was not. The changes which took place between the 1950s and the 1990s were very minor and insignificant. Why, when one compares them to the changes which took place between the 1890s and the 1920s, or between the 1980s and the present, one can safely say that your era was the most static in recent history."

"I am not really so surprised that *things* are so different," said Shelmerdine. "The really extraordinary thing is that *people* are so different. They seem an entirely different kind of person—I can hardly even say quite how—and yet many of them must have grown up in my time or just after it."

"Ah, yes. It does not take long for humanity to revert to type. Under the thin veneer of barbarism, the fundamentally civilised nature of man was always lurking."

"I can think of people who would have been horrified by such a revelation."

"Most of them were."

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Leave-taking. That first journey to an unknown school. Under whatever circumstances it is always somewhat similar. Of course, in this case, Shelmerdine was not leaving a familiar home and the bosom of a dear childhood family; but then she had never thought that way about her home and family in any case—although she did feel more than a twinge of regret at parting from a charming room at the Savoy and heading toward a place where the accommodations might well be a shade more Spartan. As a seasoned—or at any rate blooded—time traveller, she was not especially nervous at entering a new world; but then, even as a small child she had not been especially nervous at such things. She had not felt much at home anywhere, which had at least the advantage of proofing her against homesickness.

A tear did damp her cheek as she kissed the enigmatic Miss Chess goodbye; not from

any personal emotion but because she was endowed with the curious faculty of seeing such a scene, as it were, from the outside and responding emotionally to the archetypical tableau of leave-taking. The emotion was strong but shallow, like that of one watching some touching scene in a film. Miss Chess smiled a queer little smile and patted her arm. Perhaps she mistook the nature of the emotion. Or perhaps she understood something about it that Shelmerdine herself did not.

As the train pulled out, Shelmerdine waved her handkerchief. She always liked to play any role properly, and in particular she liked belonging to an era in which one waved one's handkerchief. Back home all one's gestures had to be so mumbled and mealy-mouthed. And so dreadfully Sincere.

She waved her handkerchief until Miss Chess was quite the traditional dot on the horizon. Then she withdrew herself into the carriage. She had it to herself, and it was perfectly neat and clean. Vandalism, it seemed, was largely a thing of the past.

She tucked her handkerchief back into her sleeve. She did have pockets in her jacket, but it was too closely tailored to use them for such things as handkerchiefs. She was to have properly tailored clothes at the first opportunity, but as things stood she had never felt so neat in her life. From her once slightly wayward hair, which had been cut and set into the ubiquitous bob, to her delicately robust, black shoes (which had been positively *burnished* by the Savoy's boot-boy) and perfect grey silk stockings (she had had to go back and straighten the seams three times before they passed Miss Chess's inspection), she was, and knew that she was, immaculate; and it was not a feeling that she could affect to dislike.

The carriage felt strangely empty. She felt as if she were alone for the first time since those iron fingers had closed about her wrist. It was not quite true, for she had slept alone and dressed alone; but she felt as if she had been, for some eighteen hours, enwrapped in some queer enchantment, and now it had passed, leaving her with a strange sense of aloneness. Or perhaps the aloneness was because it had not passed.

Shelmerdine shrugged, glancing in the looking-glass above the seats to see that her shrug was one that went with being immaculate. Self-analysis was not her style.

She sat carefully down in the centre of the forward-facing seat and turned her attention to the present that Miss Chess had thrust in-

to her hands just before she had boarded the train. It was neatly gift-wrapped, and, when opened, revealed two similarly gift-wrapped parcels of almost equal size and shape. The contents of the parcels were, however, quite different. The first contained a leather-bound volume entitled *A Concise Encyclopaedia of the Twenty-First Century* by one Robert Chalmers. The second was a box of Thornton's Continental Selection. Miss Chess had matched the box as closely as possible to the dimensions of the book so that they would make a neat double-parcel; and, as the book was quite a substantial volume, this made for a very generous amount of chocolates. Shelmerdine wondered whether she would eat them all on her journey. Then she thought about being immaculate. She finally settled upon a rather illogical compromise to the effect that the virtue involved in reading this dull if probably rather essential book would counteract the chocolates. For an amoralist, she often took a surprisingly moral view of life.

She selected a chocolate with the delicacy suggested to her by her white-gloved finger and thumb and flipped the book open at random.

**TECHNOLOGY:** A word much in vogue in the twentieth century. It denoted the application of the physical sciences to every form of practical endeavour. From the time of the Industrial Revolution until the late 1990s, increases in the technical abilities of mankind had, at first in western Europe and later throughout the world, been a major factor in bringing about a vast array of changes in every facet of human life. It could almost be said that technical possibilities were the largest determining force in the way people lived.

"In the mid to late '90s, the situation began to change. For a number of reasons it became clear that the perpetual forward march of technology was not to continue. Traditional sources of fuel, which had been running out for some time, now became extremely scarce. Nuclear power, in which many had placed great hopes, was banned by many countries in the wake of the disastrous events in Toronto and Budapest. Later it was to be outlawed by an International Convention. The massive seismic upheavals in America following the Three Day War disrupted the programmes of what was then the world's leading technological nation. At the same time another aftermath of the War was to have a profound effect on the world attitude to technology. The successful Islamic Rising in what was then the U.S.S.R. was the

final step in making the Islamic Bloc the second major world power, and the Sharī'ite fundamentalists who dominate this bloc were and are ideologically opposed to technology. They strove to make the scaling-down of technology a part of the international arms-reining measures which were now seen on all sides to be urgently necessary. In this they had support from many, and often surprising, quarters in the West.

"It would be untrue to say that the West was simply compelled by external events to review its attitude to technology. Attitudes had been changing for a very long time. The apogee of the West's faith in 'progress' probably came before the First World War. Throughout most of the Twentieth Century, it was seen by many as a mixed blessing, but it held an almost hypnotic sway over the western mind. Many older readers will remember the phrase "you can't stand in the way of progress", and the almost religious fatalism with which it was accepted in all quarters. What a strangely dated ring those words have today; and yet they dominated a generation. The essence of what is now called 'technologism' was a belief that whatever *could* be done *must* and would be done—often regardless of whether one wanted it or not.

"The first dent in this attitude came near the halfway mark of the century, when all sane people came to realise that the Hydrogen Bomb must be an exception to this rule. It might be necessary to retain it as a deterrent, but all were agreed that the circumstances in which it could be used must be avoided at all costs. Nearly everybody agreed that the world would be a better place if the bomb could be 'disinvented'. The psychological impact of this piece of 'unconsummated technology' upon the twentieth century has been documented by Glanville Whittaker in his influential book *The Prometheus Complex*.

"Support for the counter-technological moves of the Islamic Bloc was seen by many as 'liberating', to use a splendidly period expression. The phrase 'arms-reining' encapsulated the mood of the day. By no means everybody wanted disarmament (the Moslems frequently talked of 'beating missiles into swords') but there was a widespread feeling that technology, military and otherwise, needed to be tamed; that it should be controlled and shaped by human civilisation, rather than *vice versa*.

"Throughout the present century, the more obvious manifestations of technology in human life have receded, while in other,

subtler, ways the 'advance of technology', as it was once called, has continued——"

Shelmerdine closed the book with a decisive bang. Duty had surely been satisfied by now. She reached for another chocolate and watched the fields rolling by in the brilliant mid-morning sunshine accompanied by the rhythmic chuff-chuffing of the steam engine. She fell into a reverie which lasted until the train arrived at Granchester. *(to be continued)*

# SHELMERDINE

## BY MISS PRISCILLA LANGRIDGE

### CHAPTER II

*SHELMERDINE BINGHAM* is a young lady of good birth. Two things mark her out from the common: she has an exceptional natural talent as a pickpocket and she has found herself mysteriously transposed from the year 1989 to 2014. As this chapter opens she is about to take her place at Grancheſter School for Young Ladies, where she has been assigned by the enigmatic Miss Chess to keep watch—why she knows not—on a girl named Cara Leonie. Now read on.

#### SHELMERDINE AT SCHOOL

As the trap rattled toward the school, one thought preoccupied Shelmerdine's mind. She should, of course, have considered the matter carefully in advance, but one always forgets these things until the last minute. The thought was: what pose should she strike when she arrived? At the best of times this is a difficult question, but when one is in a strange world where one does not know what options are open to one it becomes doubly perplexing. Not that Shelmerdine had, in her own time, adopted any of the standard poses made available to her generation; but she became aware that one needs to know something of the stylistic language of an age even in order to ignore it effectively. Besides, she was not sure where she stood in relation to this age and its gestures.

Thus it was that when she entered the Senior Common Room at Grancheſter Shelmerdine made quite a good impression. Poised (she was always that) but quiet and with just that touch of uncertainty which befits a new arrival at such a venerable institution. Her normal self-assurance within whatever pose she had chosen would certainly have caused a touch of resentment.

Shelmerdine saw that a certain hesitancy, a hint of awkwardness, was being communicated by her manner and so she let that become a part of her pose, even exaggerating it a little. After all, playing the rôle of the slightly nervous new girl was no less amusing than the parting scene at the station. Why not act out a shyness and a vulnerability which was not, she preferred to think, a part of her nature?

Having given due consideration to her own social appearance, she was now at liberty to notice the three people who were at present in the Common Room. They were all, of course, a little top-heavy, but not as much so as people had seemed at first. The novel effect of the style was being to wear off. That apart, they seemed a singularly serious set of girls. They had their individual differences, of course, but, taken as a group, they seemed like a VI form who were decidedly conscious of their position as a VI form and of the dignity of being at the summit of the school hierarchy. Yes, dignity. That was the word. That was the element which one would not have expected to find among the same group in Shelmerdine's day. In a way that made them seem rather older than the equivalent group would have seemed in the 1980s; but there was also an innocence and a fresh-faced seriousness which made them seem a great deal younger.

It was the older side which asserted itself as a tall dark-haired girl approached Shelmerdine with an air of ceremonious authority which Shelmerdine's own easy self-certainty, so disconcerting to most people in her own time, would have done nothing to dent even if she had been wearing it at that moment. It made her rather glad she wasn't.

"Shelmerdine Bingham," said the girl, "welcome to our Common Room. It is not often that we play host to a mid-term arrival. Allow me to introduce Anne Hallam, our sports captain, Cara Leonie and myself, Jane Love, head of the Sixth."

Shelmerdine was not sure what she had expected Cara Leonie to look like, but certainly it was not like this. She was a small, quiet girl who appeared excessively nervous. She had a nervous mannerism of blinking repeatedly, which drew attention to her strange, green eyes, which had an almost oriental slant. When she smiled in greeting the newcomer, her upper lip drew back from her small white teeth in a manner which was difficult to describe, but extremely curious. She was polite, but gave the impression of a creature wholly enclosed within herself and yet at the same time nervously alert to every movement in the world outside her. The contrast with the solid Englishness of the two other girls could hardly have been more marked, and as the room began to fill up with hearty seniors fresh from a field trip, Cara Leonie sank more and more into the background, apparently occupied with her own thoughts.

Shelmerdine kept no more than a quarter of an eye on her. She could tell at once that Cara Leonie was abnormally sensitive and would know immediately if anybody was taking a more than usual interest in her. In fact it seemed likely that only someone with Shelmerdine's own stealth would be capable of observing her without giving herself away. "I wonder if I could pick her pocket," she mused, and determined to try.

It was not difficult to avoid paying undue attention to Cara Leonie, for Shelmerdine found that she herself was the subject of some considerable notice. It appeared that a mid-term arrival was really a very unusual thing at Granchester. The school had a waiting list stretching back to the last Ice Age, and it was virtually unheard of for some one just to turn up as Shelmerdine had done.

"Of course, I was put down for the school as an embryo," said Shelmerdine, "but I've been dogged by wretched health all my life. Literally bed-ridden. I suppose I'd given up all hope of ever having a healthy English girlhood, mixing with my own kind, playing the game with the flower of British maidenhood and all that sort of thing. Then, suddenly, the miraculous occurred. I was cured. My nameless malady vanished as mysteriously as it had appeared all those years ago. And, curiously enough, it was exactly on the tenth anniversary of the day I was first stricken in the middle of a violent nocturnal storm very like the one that had been raging on that same night ten years ago—"

The story of Shelmerdine's illness had been devised by Miss Chess. It had been a simple enough device at the time, but somehow, as Shelmerdine related it to her school-fellows, it grew into a saga of epic proportions, if the reader will forgive my cross-cultural references.

"I suppose I should be more circumspect," sighed Shelmerdine inwardly, "But really, it is their fault. They are certainly the best audience I have ever had. One could swear they believe every word." She shot a side-long glance at Cara Leonie, who was pretending not to listen. "Except, of course, for her."

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The test was positively horrific. If it had been devised by girls rather than by mistresses, Shelmerdine would have suspected it to be some sort of initiation ceremony designed to terrify new girls. It was intended to assess Shelmerdine's academic level, in order to place her within the school. "A quite

straightforward test," the Headmistress had said reassuringly. She had omitted to mention that a Ph.D. would be required in order to read the questions. Surely she was not seriously expected to understand all this. She recalled that, historically speaking, the educational standards of 1989 were very low. She remembered tales of children of previous generations being fluent in Greek at prodigiously early ages and remembered that at the turn of her century many first-formers studied comparative philology, while in her own time many pupils left school with very little exact knowledge of the grammar of their own language. She recalled a story told by a friend of her mother's who had been doing O-levels when the system was first introduced. Her maths mistress had procured some old matriculation papers, that being the equivalent examination under the old system, for the class to practice upon. They had found them utterly impenetrable. Shelmerdine knew exactly how they had felt.

She attempted the few questions she could understand and then began to fidget. She turned her attention to the handsome gold fountain pen in her pocket. There was a tiny escutcheon engraved upon the clip: presumably the arms of the family Leonie, surmised Shelmerdine.

Merely by way of passing time, she unscrewed the barrel; but when she did so, she noticed a very curious thing. The reservoir did not take up the whole length of the barrel, but was only about half an inch long, while the cavity in the barrel was only of sufficient depth to accept it. It seemed an exceedingly odd and pointless arrangement. Shelmerdine weighed the barrel. It was not heavy enough to be solid gold, yet probably not light enough to be hollow. After some investigation Shelmerdine managed to slip a fingernail under the plate which closed the end of the barrel. There was a tiny click as an internal spring released the larger circular plate which sealed the barrel on the inside, revealing a secret chamber beyond the one which accepted the reservoir. A little teasing with the point of her pencil extracted a small quantity of tightly-packed cotton wool in which were embedded five quite large cut diamonds. After examining them for a few moments, Shelmerdine packed everything back neatly as she had found it and replaced the pen in her pocket.

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"How was it?" asked several voices in the Common Room that evening.

"It was terrible," replied Shelmerdine. "It

revealed to me a dreadful fact which I had not hitherto suspected. A cruel and mocking irony. While my body is recovered completely and is as strong and healthy as if I had led an active life, my mind, during my years of prostration, has atrophied. The simplest questions threw me into chaos and confusion. No longer the invalid, I shall become the village idiot, alternately pitied or mocked according to the whim of the passer-by——”

“Rot,” interrupted Jane Love sternly but not unkindly. “I doubt if the test went as badly as you think, but even if it did it will only be from want of practice. Hard work and application will soon have you up to standard.”

Shelmerdine winced. Hard work and application, indeed. What kind of a school was it where even the girls used words like that? Her grimace did not go unnoticed.

A tall and rather solemn-looking girl named Veronica Carlisle rose to her feet. “Now look here, Shelmerdine. I’m not sure you’re as broken up about this as you pretend. I suspect you of trying to play ragtime on us in some way and I suspect you of being an idler. Let me tell you that we don’t put up with idlers here.”

Shelmerdine raised an eyebrow and looked at Veronica with that mixture of pity and distaste reserved for drunks who accost one in the street. “What do you propose to do,” she asked languidly, “roast me in front of the fire or belabour me with a cricket stump?”

“We don’t have to be as unsubtle as that to deal with outsiders,” said Veronica in a cold, matter-of-fact tone.

“That will be quite enough, Veronica,” said Jane Love quietly. Shelmerdine was faintly amazed at her cool assumption of absolute authority. “The girl has just pulled through a long illness and she has only been here five minutes. Give her a chance to settle in.”

There was a tense silence, broken by the hesitant voice of Cara Leonie. “I say, there isn’t any need to look out for my fountain pen now. I—um—seem to have had it in my pocket all the time.”

“Oh, Cara, honestly,” said someone.

There was a knock at the door. A junior girl entered. “Can Shelmerdine Bingham please go to see Miss Tavistock,” she piped, and waited to catch a glimpse of the unexpected new girl. Shelmerdine threw wide her arms in a melodramatic gesture and said “There, what did I tell you? You mock me but my grief is real.”

\* \* \*

“She seems intelligent enough to speak

to,” said Miss Robbins. “

Probably some dreadfully old-fashioned governess,” said Miss Tavistock, the Headmistress.

There was a knock at the door. “Enter,” she called. Shelmerdine did.

There was a moment of silence. “I am not going to tell you the exact result of your test,” began Miss Tavistock.

“Touch under par?” said Shelmerdine.

“Rather more than that. I fear. I would venture to suggest that your previous education has not been quite up to the modern standard.”

“Child-centred,” said Shelmerdine.

“Oh, come now. I am sure it was not that Elizabethan.”

“Well, perhaps I exaggerate a little.”

“But not by much.” said Miss Robbins grimly. She found Shelmerdine less amusing than did the Headmistress.

“Quite so,” said Miss Tavistock. She glanced at Miss Robbins, who left the room.

The Headmistress lowered her voice to a confidential and kindly tone. “I need hardly tell you, Shelmerdine, that it will take hard work and application to come up to the standard of a normal girl of your age. I doubt whether that will trouble you unduly. I know that you are a girl who has already shown great courage and determination in your life. However, there is something else which I must tell you. After careful consideration, Miss Robbins and I have decided that it would be pointless and unfair to keep you in the Sixth. The work would be far beyond you. For the present time, therefore, you are to be a member of the Third Form. Even there I think you will find the work very much more demanding than that to which you have become accustomed, but you are gifted with a splendid intelligence, and if you apply yourself I feel sure that you will gain a remove before very long. I have been dealing with girls for a long time, and despite your test result I am well able to tell that you have an excellent mind, and will find it far less difficult than many another girl placed in your rather awkward position.

“I also wish you to know that my door, figuratively speaking, is always open and that if you should have any difficulties in the weeks ahead, I shall be more than happy to talk them over with you. Now, is there anything you wish to say?”

“I—I don’t know what to say,” faltered Shelmerdine; and for once she really didn’t.

Her first thought had been that while she

might well have the mental equipment to bring herself up to the rather ferocious academic standards of Grancheſter, she was certainly far too lazy to put in the effort required. Her second thought was one of incredulity in catching herself thinking the first. After all, she was not *really* a schoolgirl. This was a game,—a cover. There was no reason for her even to consider doing any serious work, and nothing to worry about whether she did or not. She must take care not to start getting swept into this game and taking it seriously. After all, she had never been tempted to take anything seriously in her own century, when she had some reason to. She had resisted all sorts of pressures without even really trying. Why did she suddenly catch herself taking this place seriously? "Perhaps because it takes itself seriously," she thought. She smiled and mentally dusted off her hands, having neatly disposed of that problem.

"What a crimp!" said Jane Love, uncharacteristically colloquial in her sympathy. "But never mind, Miss Tavistock knows what she is doing, and I'm sure you will be back among us in no time and thirty seconds."

"I'm sure I shall," said Shelmerdine, the real warmth beneath Jane's no-nonsense manner cutting short a more flippant reply.

"So, you're a junior now," said Veronica Carlisle as she conducted Shelmerdine to the Third Form Common Room, an office for which she had promptly volunteered. "Let me warn you that if I get any more cheek of the kind you gave me earlier I shall sit on you hard."

"Aye aye, Sir," replied Shelmerdine and sauntered into her new Common Room with the air of one who, if she did not actually own the place, at least had a majority shareholding.

The room was filled with girls, mostly aged thirteen or fourteen, though there were a few younger ones who had gained an early remove and a few older ones who had not yet attained the necessary standard to pass into the Fourth. None was as old as Shelmerdine, however, and every eye turned upon her as she entered.

"I shall not trouble to introduce myself," she said. "I trust my fame has preceded me."

"To the utmost," confirmed a freckle-faced imp by the name of Alison Clarke.

"What a beastly crimp, though," put in another voice.

"Still, Miss Tavistock is bound to know what she is doing," pontificated a third.

"Why does everybody say the same things here," mused Shelmerdine. "Come to think of it, I suppose everybody said the same things back in the 'eighties. One notices them less when one is familiar with them." Shelmerdine perched herself comfortably but not inelegantly on the edge of a table and somebody at once stepped forward to confront her. The somebody in question was about fourteen and half a head shorter than herself. Her jet black hair was bobbed with the severest precision and she was at least as immaculate as any member of the Sixth. Her features had a sharp, almost elfin delicateness which was attractive without being exactly pretty and she was closely followed by another girl who does not need to be described, because she was identical to the first in every respect.

"Now, let's get down to business," said the first.

"Bless my boater," expostulated Shelmerdine. "The identical twins. I should have expected you. No school yarn complete without them, what?"

"Bang on the bean," confirmed the foremost twin.

"And this is going to be triple-X corker of a schoolgirl yarn if we have anything to say about it," expanded the hindmost.

"Allow me to introduce my sister, Caroline Fielding," said the foremost.

"Allow me to introduce my sister, Dorothy of that ilk," said the hindmost.

"But you can call them Dot and Carrie," put in Alison Clarke.

"I don't recall saying so," said Dot with some dignity.

"Take no notice of these whippersnappers," said Carrie to Shelmerdine. "They've no respect for their elders." At fourteen-and-a-half, Dot and Carrie were a little older than most of the girls in the form, but by no means all of them.

"Which brings us to the point," said Dot.

"In a roundabout sort of way," added Carrie.

"Well, let my boater be doubly beatified," said Shelmerdine. "You even complete each other's sentences."

"Bilge," said Dot tersely.

"And balderdash," emphasised Carrie.

"You don't want to believe all the rot you read about twins in Mrs. Edgeley's schoolgirl books," admonished Dot.

"Ripping as they are," added Carrie.

"Anyway, we stray from the point," said Dot.

"The point is that you are just a touch

over age for our Form."

"But Miss Tavistock wanted us to take you in, and we haven't the heart to refuse," explained Carrie.

"So now you're here," continued Dot, "the great question is this: are you going to be one of the chaps, or is it going to be like having a Sixther sitting in on our deliberations?"

"Or to put it another way," clarified Carrie, "are you game?"

"I suppose you realise," said Shelmerdine in a solemn and meditative tone, "that the way you are phrasing this proposition is calculated to sway my response in a particular direction."

"A Sixther, then," said Carrie.

"You have said so, not I," said Shelmerdine. "I am merely trying to form a balanced view of the proposition you are putting to me."

"To sum it up concisely," said Marian Greene, a girl who was old enough to be in the fourth, and no great admirer of Dot and Carrie, "are you going to behave like some semblance of an intelligent human being or are you going to join these young half-wits in playing the goat?"

Shelmerdine smiled. "A much more lucid summation of the problem," she said. "Put that way, my course is clear. The goat it is."

If every voice in the room did not join in the cheer which shook it, one can only surmise that several of the girls were doing the work of two. "Within reason, of course," said Shelmerdine, less from any sense of responsibility than because she always liked to keep people a little uncertain about her exact position.

"Oh perfectly," said Dot, "we wouldn't go in for anything yahoo. Just the odd spot of jinks to prevent life from becoming too unamusing."

Shelmerdine found herself unexpectedly comfortable among the Third. The twins warmed to her at once. Most of the others were just a touch in awe of her superior age, which she did not mind at all, but the twins immediately accepted her as more-or-less an equal, which, from them, was a signal compliment.

The twins were, unofficially, the joint leader of the Third. Their close friend and confidante was Alison Clarke, and it became clear almost from the beginning that Shelmerdine was welcome as a fourth member of the Inner Circle. Whether she would fully take up the position she was not certain. She had always regarded herself as "the Cat that Walked by Itself". At the same time, the idea of the

twins' "jinks" appealed to her. After all, one might as well have some amusement while one was here.

The twins and Alison virtually monopolised the new arrival during the first few days, much to the annoyance of many curious members of the Third. It was obvious to all that Shelmerdine was quite a property. Not only was she old enough to be a Sixther and game, but she was amusing, always seemed to say and do the unexpected and—and, well, there was a certain indefinable something about her upon which nobody could put a finger but which everybody sensed. Shelmerdine Bingham was different.

For Shelmerdine, her reception by the Third in general and the Inner Circle in particular was a novel sensation. She was used to being regarded as different, or even odd. She always had been. In the past some people had held her in awe, others had avoided her and some had wanted to get to know her, though Shelmerdine had never allowed them to because they had never been the sort of people she wished to know.

Here, however, the whole atmosphere was different. She found herself the object of an attention of a kind she had never before encountered. It was as if people were less guarded, less insecure, and therefore could show a curiosity about her which was quite open and genial. There seemed, strangely enough, to be a less rigid attitude to Shelmerdine's lack of conformity—and indeed to lack of conformity in general. In Shelmerdine's own time, a time which had prided itself on its nonconformity, there had always been a dark suspicion of any one who did not conform in the precise ways specified by the times. Here, where conformity was the norm, eccentricity seemed to be far more easily tolerated.

The twins and Shelmerdine formed a well-matched group. The twins looked rather older than their age and Shelmerdine a little younger than hers, and all three were immaculately well-groomed. People as a whole were neater in this era, an observation which does not necessarily extend to the members of Form III, but the twins, as of nature, carried themselves with a demure dignity which belied their impish interiors, and were fastidious to a fault about their personal appearance. To Shelmerdine, neatness did not come naturally, but from the moment she had put on the Granchester uniform she had made the most strenuous efforts to be neat and to comport herself immaculately. It was probably the first thing over which she had made

any real effort in her life, and if one had asked her why, and had been lucky enough to catch her in a rare moment of candour, she could not have answered.

At breakfast the next morning, Shelmerdine sat with the Inner Circle. The twins felt duty bound to fulfil the promise of the previous day and initiate forthwith some rag which would not disappoint the newcomer.

"Dares," said Carrie. This mysterious utterance was at once recognised by her sister as being the continuation of a hastily-whispered conversation which had taken place at the wash-bowl.

"Dares—" mused Dot.

Shelmerdine, not wishing the twins to assume that they had any automatic right to the initiative, at once stepped in.

"Excellent idea," she said. The twins were stunned by her alacrity. "I shall begin, Carrie, I dare you—"

"You can't dare Carrie on her own," interrupted Dot. "We do everything together."

"Very well then, Sisters Fielding, I dare you to drink a *toast* out of the Hope Carrington Cup."

There was a moment of silence. The twins had mentioned the Cup last night. It was awarded each year to the winner of the inter-house fencing tournament, and was one of the school's most coveted treasures, having been presented some years ago by an old girl, Lady Deirdre Hope-Carrington.

"Not possible," objected Carrie. "The cup is locked in a glass cabinet in the Head's Study."

"Then you decline the dare?" asked Shelmerdine.

"It isn't a matter of declining it," said Dot. "It can't be done."

"Ah me," lamented Shelmerdine, "youngsters today. No initiative. Now, when I was your age—"

"Why don't you do it yourself then, since you are so jolly clever," challenged Dot.

"Why, of course I shall," said Shelmerdine. "I always perform my own dares if somebody refuses them. I think we should make that a rule."

After lunch the Inner Circle gathered in one of their favourite meeting places—seated on a low section of wall almost completely screened by an overhanging tree.

"Have you brought the ginger beer?" asked Shelmerdine.

"Here it is," said Carrie.

"Good, then I shall fetch the cup. I shouldn't be five minutes."

"I say," said Dot, "I'm not sure we ought to let you do this. I mean, you haven't been here long."

"And you've never been at school before," added Carrie.

"We shouldn't want to start leading you into frightful trouble."

"I haven't noticed anybody leading me," said Shelmerdine. "Now stop bothering or I shan't be able to get it back before the Head returns from lunch."

Shelmerdine was rather less than her stated five minutes. She already had the key to the Head's Study in her pocket, having brushed past Miss Tavistock on her way to lunch. It was on a small silver ring with a number of other keys, one of which fitted the trophy cabinet. It would be a simple matter to rinse the cup in a lavatory after the *toast*, dry it on a hand towel and return it. She would leave the keys in the door of the room, confident that the absent-minded Headmistress would believe she had left them there herself.

"To high jinks and low cunning," Shelmerdine was about to say as she raised the Cup, brimming with frothy ginger beer; but she did not say it. She looked at the eyes of her three companions, bright with excitement and admiration, and knew that such a *toast* would go terribly against the grain.

"To Granchester," she said.

"To Granchester," echoed the three and, after passing the Cup round, raised, quite without embarrassment, three hearty cheers.

As Shelmerdine sauntered back to the group, having replaced the Cup, she felt a curious sense of wellbeing. The sun was shining down the mile-long natural valley which formed the School's garden. It was cut into long terraces upon which were flower beds and little lawns, while the silvery river wound away into the distance. The old stone of the School itself had a solidity which she had never found in the equally venerable building in which her former education had taken place. It was not sullied with modern conveniences, and, somehow, the people within it seemed a part of it in a way that had not been so in her day. The present era and that in which the School had been built were two very different ages, yet there was no violent rupture between them that would make either one seem alien in the eyes of the other.

This sense of harmony with history merged in her mind with the harmony of the gardens and of the sunlight and with that soaring sensation in her breast which excite-

ment and danger invariably brought. Interestingly, her heart had beaten faster during this escapade, where the risks, so far as Shelmerdine was concerned, were of no account whatever, than it had in many transgressions of the law; and she was now filled with a sense of satisfaction greater than she had felt for some considerable time.

—*To be continued*—

# SHELMERDINE

## BY MISS PRISCILLA LANGRIDGE

### CHAPTER III

**SHELMERDINE BINGHAM**, a girl from the late 20th century, finds herself in the year 2014, and is despatched to Granchesler School for Young Ladies on a secret mission that is secret even from her.

#### TETES A TETE

THE Hope-Carrington Cup incident had three main results: it consolidated the general feeling, already abroad in the Third, that Shelmerdine Bingham was Somebody (for the news of her exploit soon got about despite the resolve of the twins and Alison to tell nobody save a few trusted confidantes); secondly it left the twins with a powerful resolve to do something which would make it clear that they were every bit as dashing and resourceful as their new friend; and thirdly, it established the game of dares as the it-thing for that term.

All kinds of madcap stunts were performed, even by some of the quieter members of the form,—in proof of their courage in the face of a dare. Even the disapproving Marian Greene was finally prevailed upon to climb the flagpole in the Main Courtyard and leave her lace handkerchief fluttering just above the flag. But even the notable occasion upon which three girls came into a maths. lesson wearing carnations in their buttonholes—an unheard-of deviation from uniform regulations—did not eclipse Shelmerdine's classic feat. There were some who regarded it as no more than a false rumour, but they were decidedly in the minority.

The feeling of anticlimax which often overtook Shelmerdine after some piece of excitement settled upon her with an unusual weight about an hour after the toast had been drunk. She felt a little surprised that the business should have affected her at all. She had noticed over the past year that she had become increasingly blasé about her pilferings. She could steal a considerable sum in the morning, squander it in the afternoon and have practically forgotten all about it by bedtime. The Cup affair had not only excited her more than anything had for some time, but had brought in its wake a corresponding dark reaction.

As she sat at prep. that evening, the feel-

ing of harmony she had felt earlier in the day became twisted about in her mind until it seemed almost that the stone walls were closing in and taking possession of her. As if in taking the Cup and winning the admiration of the Inner Circle she had somehow compromised herself; given a part of herself up as a hostage to the outside world. It did not make much sense, admittedly, even to her; but that did not stop the sensation from gnawing at her, making her feel cold and dark and as if she had given away some part of her self-possession.

This mood was not helped by the fact that she had found her first day's lessons unutterably boring. Nothing had been expected from her as she was not prepared. She could follow little of what was being said and did not try. Possibly the enforced inactivity had led her to dwell on the Cup more than she would otherwise have done, though even with this distraction she found much of the day very tedious.

The kindly young Form Mistress, Miss Ling, had helpfully laid out with her a preparation plan which would help her to catch up with the form's work and also allow her to gain something from the next day's lessons.

Shelmerdine had followed this with apparent interest, partly because courtesy was deeply ingrained in her being. It was her strong sense of courtesy which made her so effective at being consciously impolite when she wished; but she found it impossible to be rude merely through negligence. In any case she felt immediately affectionate towards Miss Ling. Everybody did.

None of this, however, made the actual work of the preparation any less repugnant. Granchesler, it seemed, expected Herculean efforts as a matter of course. Shelmerdine toyed with the idea of simply not doing it. After all, she was not *really* a schoolgirl. But she supposed she must do something to maintain her cover. If she were expelled—Well, what if she *were* expelled? She had never intended to stay here long. She would simply go on to new adventures. Yet, somehow, she did not feel that she wanted to do that just yet. What a pity Miss Tavistock had realised her intelligence. The simplest thing would have been to play dumb-bunny and to be incapable of all but the most elementary efforts.

Well, that is what she would do anyway. Let them make of it what they wished. However intelligent she might seem in other ways, she would just happen to be the most

improbably preposterous academic duffer. This thought chimed in perfectly with her sombre mood, and it was with a certain grim glee that she began slinging down facts and figures upon a sheet of paper without the smallest regard for logic or veracity.

Shelmerdine was alone in the Third Form Study. Her long interview with Miss Ling had taken up most of the official prep. period, and thus she began work just as the others were finishing. Perhaps the emptiness of the tall room, with its long Norman windows reflecting the candle flames against the darkening sky, had helped to bring on her mood. But now she felt freer for having no eyes upon her and handled her papers almost as roughly as she was handling her work. Several of them fluttered off the back of her desk as the door swung open. She watched them scud along the dusty floorboards and did not bother to pick them up.

The door had not opened by itself. A small girl by the name of Flavia Randall was the motive force and she quietly entered the room. Flavia was rather a strange little creature, not overly popular with the form, though not actually unpopular. Shelmerdine had noticed that she had a very particular manner. She carried herself very erect and with an aristocratic bearing which seemed rather quaint in one so young, for she was probably no more than twelve, being one of those clever children who were promoted early into the Third. She had no friends and seemed not to care whether people liked her or not. "The cat who walks by herself", thought Shelmerdine.

Flavia walked over to her desk as if she had come to fetch something. Then she noticed Shelmerdine's papers on the floor.

"I say, you have dropped something," she said, with an air of friendliness which was unusual in her.

"I know," said Shelmerdine, not returning it.

"Shall I pick them up for you?" Her speaking voice was clear and terribly, terribly precise. Most people here spoke in a precise manner which in Shelmerdine's day would have been considered quite stilted, but in Flavia this was far more marked, to the extent that her own contemporaries probably considered her stilted.

"If you wish," said Shelmerdine unexpressively.

Flavia picked up the papers, casting her eye over them. "I say, these calculations are not right."

"I know," replied Shelmerdine curtly.

"Are you having trouble with them?"

"No, I am not having any trouble at all."

"But, if you cannot get them right—"

"You are leaping to conclusions, m'dear.

It is not so much that I cannot get them right. Perhaps I could if I tried but I am not trying. Consequently they are not giving me any trouble. Now if that meets with your approval, perhaps I might be permitted to continue working—or rather not working."

Flavia placed the papers on Shelmerdine's desk and looked at her with a gaze that was somehow disconcerting. She had hair of a most remarkable fox-red, which made her pale skin seem almost æthereal by contrast; and her large eyes were so clear and blue that they seemed almost luminous in the candle-light. She looked at Shelmerdine with a gaze that was so utterly open and unguarded that Shelmerdine found it difficult to return. Shelmerdine had never found any gaze difficult to return before. Not even when she was lying like an estate agent. Flavia's gaze, like her voice, seemed to be like those of other people of her age only very much more so.

"I could help you with the work," she said simply. Her voice was without condescension or any other note save that of a simple, practical desire to help—that and, somewhere beneath many layers of strict training in utter outward composure, an unaccountable nervousness.

"I don't need help," said Shelmerdine. "I have settled upon my method and intend to pursue it."

"There is not any need to be so independent. I am your friend."

"I choose my friends; and I am not being independent. I simply prefer to go through life efficiently. Efficiency means getting the maximum possible benefit from the minimum possible effort. That is my approach to this work and I shall thank you not to interfere."

If Shelmerdine had fancied that she saw something of herself in this curious child, she decided that she was mistaken. Her quiet persistence in the face of this snub was far from Shelmerdine's nature and, indeed, quite inexplicable to her.

"I happen to know that is not true," she said quietly but with absolute conviction.

This nonplussed Shelmerdine. She knew perfectly well that she had been talking the plain unvarnished. In fact she couldn't have got much plainer or less varnished if she had tried. "What on earth gives you that idea?" she asked.

"I know about you," said Flavia firmly—did her clear eyes miss just a trifle?—"I know what you are."

"Oh," said Shelmerdine in her most languid manner. "And what am I?"

"You're a sport," said Flavia. "You cannot deceive me. I know perfectly well that you would not do something as unsporting as purposely fuzzling your work; especially when darling has given you a special programme and looked after you so nicely. You are just hopelessly out of your depth and too proud to admit it. I understand. I should be too proud to admit it too."

"Now just one moment, Shorty——"

"No, please, Shelmerdine—I know you are years older than I, but I really do know the work well. I would probably be in the Fourth if the Head was not chary of promoting girls too far above their ages. I know it sounds humiliating, but I promise that nobody will ever know except you and I. You have pulled through your illness so terribly bravely; you simply must not baulk at this last fence. Let me help you over it, Shelmerdine, please do not be too proud. I want so much to help you and I—I respect you terribly."

"What a beastly crimp!" thought Shelmerdine as she tidied together her books and papers an hour later.

"There, how was that?" asked Flavia. She had carefully and with the utmost tact guided the older girl through the labyrinth of her first preparation, laying things out so clearly that Shelmerdine's keen intelligence could not fail to grasp them, despite the fact that she had never done work of anywhere near this standard before.

"Boring to a degree," replied Shelmerdine. Flavia smiled warmly. She understood pride very well and knew that Shelmerdine could not but hide her unnecessary but all too poignant sense of shame beneath a camouflage of rather cutting banter. Flavia was proud too, but she was also brave, and she would not let herself be deflected from her set purpose of helping her heroine—forcing her if necessary—to conquer her inward enemy of shame and despair. As a child, Flavia had been schooled to an extraordinary standard of self-discipline. She could, on demand, awaken every hour on the hour during the night without a call, take a cold dip and return to sleep for the next hour. Duty, to her, was an irresistible driving-force, overriding all else, and in Shelmerdine she saw duty.

Shelmerdine took toward schoolwork a utilitarian attitude not uncommon in her age:

viz. that it served no useful purpose; that the things she was learning had no practical application and that she would, in any case, forget them within a very short time of discontinuing her studies. These arguments would have been strong enough in her eyes even if she had been a real schoolgirl. As it was, time and effort spent on Granchester's rigorous programme of study was doubly wasted.

"You know, you are more intelligent than most of the girls here," said Flavia as they were leaving the room. "You will soon catch up. You are quite lucky in that respect."

"That is exactly what the Head said," remarked Shelmerdine.

"Well," said Flavia with a satisfied smile, "there you are then".

"What a bebothering crimp," Shelmerdine thought again. She had not intended to express herself in that silly slang, but those seemed to be the only words which expressed her exact *nuance* of miffedness.

The next day's lessons were much clearer to her in consequence of her preparation, and Shelmerdine felt compelled to admit that at least it passed the time to be able to understand in part what was going on. Nonetheless she was distinctly relieved when lunchtime came and the twins turned her thoughts to more interesting fare.

"We need a dare," said Dot.

"Yes, you owe us one," said Carrie.

"We didn't do your last one, so it's still your turn to give us one," said Dot.

"But it's got to be one we can do," said Carrie. "We couldn't have done the Cup one. We still don't know how you got hold of it."

"Yes, how did you get hold of it?" asked Dot.

"Well, what can you do?" asked Shelmerdine, ignoring the question.

"They can play the piano," volunteered Alison. "Four-handed, of course. I was at their place over the hols. and they gave a rendering of 'My Feet Just Dance Away' that would leave the Leicester Square Six gaping."

At the mention of this title, the Inner Circle burst into well-rehearsed three-part harmony, for this was their party piece.

"Ev'ry time I walk down the street,

I'm so anxious whom I may meet,

'Cause when I hear that rhythm

My feet just dance away."

The second verse was cut short by the Stentorian tones of Veronica Carslisle: "An order mark for each girl singing at table."

Shelmerdine applauded the song vigorously so as not to miss her share of the order marks.

"Shelmerdine Bingham, take an order mark and three hundred lines," said Veronica.

"May I ask," enquired Shelmerdine coldly, "why applauding is a greater offence than performing?"

"Because doing it after I had spoken was direct, deliberate defiance. Make it five hundred for answering back."

Veronica closed the discussion by walking away.

"As I was about to say before I was so rudely interrupted," said Shelmerdine, "the twins' pianistic genius should not be wasted, and I hereby dare them to play 'My Feet Just Dance Away' on the VI Form piano."

The VI Form piano was a good piano. It was the only really good piano in the School. It was allowed to be touched only by mistresses and the senior music scholars, and was under the charge of Miss Maitland, who detested popular music of all kinds.

"Gollwogs!" said Dot.

"Applestrudel!" said Carrie.

"I shall do it if you don't want to," said Shelmerdine, "though I warn you that you may never want to hear the tune again by the time I've finished with it."

"Oh no you won't," said Dot.

"It's a corker," said Carrie.

"But we'll have to work out the best time to do it," said Dot.

"*Mais naturellement*," said Shelmerdine.

The rest of the day passed uneventfully. Shelmerdine found herself happy enough, though towards the end of the lessons it began to occur to her that there was really no way to avoid writing five hundred lines for that vindictive prig Veronica Carlisle. She found her frame of mind on the subject somewhat curious. For one thing, the argument that she was not really a schoolgirl failed to arouse any inner storm against the imposition. Perhaps she had worn it out. Her whole spirit positively rebelled against the tedium of such a punishment, and yet she was surprised to find herself quietly resigned to doing it. It was as if she were divided into two camps;—part of her hated the thought and the other half really did not mind at all. The obvious, and, to Shelmerdine, rather worrying, explanation—that she was becoming moulded into the School's pattern—did not seem to cover the case. Shelmerdine still found lots of resistance within her to the

work of the School; but to this punitive exercise, which, furthermore, she strongly suspected was mainly due to Veronica Carlisle's desire to squash her at the first possible opportunity, she found virtually none.

She had been entertaining these thoughts as she mounted the East Staircase to wash for dinner. At the top she encountered Jane Love, who gave her a pleasant smile.

"Hello, kiddie," said Jane. It took Shelmerdine a moment to realise that she was being addressed. Jane's whole tone had changed since their last encounter. To Jane, Shelmerdine's demotion made an almost supernatural difference. She was no longer a near-equal, but a third-former,—a kiddie. Shelmerdine could tell that this was not in any way a slight. It was just the way of things as far as Jane, and perhaps not only Jane, was concerned. The spell of it was so powerful that Jane looked at least half-a-head taller than she had done before.

"Hello, Jane," said Shelmerdine.

"How are we settling?" asked Jane.

"Oh, well enough."

"Good. Pop along and see Veronica, would you. She has something to tell you."

Shelmerdine popped.

"Hello, squirt," said Veronica cheerily as Shelmerdine entered. "Have you done those lines for me yet?"

"No, Veronica," said Shelmerdine. Her hands were clasped behind her back and her voice was very small. Veronica, who had pointedly not looked up from some work that she was doing, now raised her eyes to her visitor, perhaps to make sure that this really was the same Shelmerdine Bingham; the one with the disdainful little nose, the cool, imperturbable voice and the smile whose quiet, understated arrogance was more complete than any arrogance she could remember. "I hadn't—"

"You hadn't time," completed Veronica sarcastically, as if she had considered this a quite inadequate excuse, although she must have known that Shelmerdine could hardly have begun them until after dinner.

"I am sorry," said Shelmerdine simply. She felt hot. There was a touch of colour on each cheek; unusual for her. She too wondered what had happened to her. She knew, although she had not known it at the time, that Veronica's casual imposition of the extra two hundred lines for answering back had done something extraordinary to her, though what it was she could not tell.

"Of course you hadn't time," said Veron-

ica peremptorily. "You have had no free time, since the lines were set. Why on earth are you apologising to me?"

"I don't know," said Shelmerdine. What a ridiculous reply, she thought. She knew how to hammer this sort of wit into the ground with one eyebrow, and yet she seemed incapable of anything more than the feeblest and humblest of replies.

"Well, are you going to find time now?"

"Yes, Veronica," Shelmerdine gazed at her inquisitor. Her hair was raven black; her complexion almost as pale as Shelmerdine's own. Her eyes were very dark, and her black eyebrows curved above them in well-shaped, tapering bows. Her mouth was well-shaped too, but perhaps a shade too compressed. Shelmerdine found herself gazing at her with a fascinated attention.

"Wrong," said Veronica. "You are not going to find time to do the lines. I have been speaking to Jane Love. It seems that you have a great deal of work to catch up on. They do not want you to be burdened with lengthy impositions just yet. So I'm going to let you off the lines."

"Thank you, Veronica."

Veronica returned to her work without dismissing Shelmerdine, who stood for some minutes in uncertainty, not knowing whether to stay or leave. Eventually she decided that such uncertainty was foolish. She had only to ask. When had she ever had difficulty in asking anything? She began to speak.

"Silence," said Veronica without looking up.

After what seemed like an hour and a half, but was probably no more than a few minutes, Veronica closed her book, stood up and walked over to Shelmerdine. She was a very tall girl, and she stood for a moment, letting her superior height overshadow Shelmerdine. Then she slipped her long, pale fingers beneath Shelmerdine's bob and gently took her ear lobe. Shelmerdine's ears were hot and the fingers felt almost cold. Shelmerdine looked straight at the prefect, showing not a flicker of surprise, nor any protest as she pinched the lobe, making it ache.

"I hear your work is going unexpectedly well from what little can be told in these early days."

"Thank you, Veronica."

"Don't thank me. I still think you're an idler." She pressed her thumbnail into the lobe. Shelmerdine did not wince. She stood straight, giving no sign that she was being

hurt, just as Veronica gave no acknowledgement to the fact that she was hurting her. "Anything to say?"

"I think you are right, Veronica."

"Well, have a care, little one. There are more ways of killing a cat than choking it with lines. Do we understand each other?"

"Yes, Veronica."

"Good girl." Veronica dropped her hand and spoke in a tone which implied dismissal, but Shelmerdine had not been dismissed and did not move. Veronica smiled. "Off you trot," she said.

"I wonder what that was all about?" mused Shelmerdine as she walked slowly down the starkly imposing passage known as the Long Corridor, in which Veronica's room was situated, placing a cooling knuckle beneath her throbbing ear. The question referred less to Veronica's behaviour than to her own.

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"I suppose you'll be out of commish. again this evening with all those lines," said Alison at dinner.

"I shouldn't think so," said Shelmerdine, "I've been let off."

"Curl my toes!" postulated Carrie. "You are honoured. Your place in history is assured. Veronica Carlisle has let somebody off something and you are the letoffee."

"And we thought fetching the Hope-Carrington Cup was a pretty trick," said Dot. "Why, the girl was just warming up. What is your secret? Hypnosis? The Fourth Dimension? Come now, your public has a right to know."

"The truth, I fear, is rather banal. Higher authorities appear to have intervened on my behalf."

"Applestrudel!" said Dot. "I bet she was miffed!"

"She didn't pinch your ear, did she?" asked Carrie.

"'Stroldinary experience," replied Shelmerdine. "Shouldn't have missed if for the world."

It occurred to Shelmerdine, however, that she should be out of commish. if Flavia managed to buttonhole her again and she began to wonder how she might give the wretched child the slip. She was pleased to find herself wondering this, because there had been an awful moment as she had nursed her ear in the Long Corridor when the dreadful thought had occurred to her that she might somehow have become tame. She had not. She made up her mind to go back to her former plan of be-

ing a dunce. Not only did she consider the work worthless, but she did not want Alison and the twins to find out about the business with Flavia; not for the reasons for which Flavia had imagined that she would be ashamed of her tuition, but because she could hardly imagine what three such game chaps would think of somebody voluntarily doing extra work.

As it happened, this latter question was answered that very evening. After the bell rang to sound the end of the compulsory prep. period, Dot and Carrie showed no sign of putting away their work, but stayed on to continue with their studies. She was to discover that the twins were, in fact, moderately hard-working and that Flavia was by no means alone in considering it unsporting to give of anything not within striking distance of one's best.

Shelmerdine was a little surprised, but more pleased by the twins' presence. It meant that Flavia could not, given her undertaking that nobody but she and Shelmerdine should know, help her with her work tonight. She packed up her things and left the room quickly, for fear that the twins might soon depart leaving her undefended. It was a sound move theoretically, but she was soon to discover that it was a mistake.

As Shelmerdine left the room, she was at once greeted by Flavia.

"Hello, Shelmerdine," said that frail, fair personage. "I was afraid for a moment that you were going to stay in there, which would have made things a bit awkward, but I might have guessed you would think to come and meet me out here."

"I really don't think there's anywhere we could work, though, Shorty. The Common Room will be full and there are bound to be chaps in the library."

Flavia smiled an intimate, almost giggly little smile. "Come with me," she said. "You'll see."

Shelmerdine followed Flavia down the corridor and off along a side-passage. She was still not very familiar with the layout of the house. At the end of this rather narrow, dark passage was a door which looked as if it might have belonged to a boot-cupboard. Flavia opened this door and stepped inside. The room was half-lighted by a small fire burning in the grate. Even before Flavia had lit the two candles which stood on the little mantelshelf—hardly more than an edge formed by the projection of the Victorian cast-iron fireplace—Shelmerdine saw that she was in a room which, while scarcely big-

ger than the boot-cupboard she had at first envisioned, was a tiny bedroom with velvet curtains, a very fine miniature bureau and a little upright chair. There was no room for any furniture other than these two pieces and the bed; but the space above the bedhead was lined with beautifully bound books and the rest of the walls were covered with ornately framed pictures, most of which appeared to be of some antiquity. In attempting to compare it to Veronica's room, Shelmerdine realised how very fascinated she must have been with Veronica herself, for, despite the time she had spent there with nothing to do but look about, she could remember almost nothing of that room. Even so, she was sure that while it was rather larger than this one and quite well-appointed, it certainly lacked the solid, though cosy, opulence of Flavia's abode.

Shelmerdine was rather taken aback. The only privacy afforded to any third-former, herself included, was that of a curtained cubicle in a dormitory of six to eight girls. Only the VI and a few privileged fifth-formers had shared rooms and only a handful of senior prefects had rooms of their own. Not only that, but some servant was obviously detailed to light Flavia's fire before her arrival, since, presumably, she did not have a first-form fag for the job as did members of the Sixth.

"What a jolly little habitat," said Shelmerdine. "Where did you find it?"

"Oh, one has to have somewhere," said Flavia uninformatively. She reached above the bed for a book. "Jolly useful, though. I have all sorts of things here that we might need." She opened her bureau and offered Shelmerdine the delicately carved little chair, taking her own seat on the bed, just below the pillow;—a position which, owing to the size of the room, was close beside Shelmerdine. She smiled contentedly. She had always intended to move these study sessions into her own room. How useful of the twins to make the occasion for the change so quickly.

### PRINCIPLES OF GOVERNMENT

*"A DEMOCRACY is a government of all by a majority of proletarians; a soviet, a government by a small group of proletarians; and a dictatorship, a government by a single proletarian. In the traditional and unanimous society there is a government by a hereditary aristocracy, the function of which is to maintain an existing order based on eternal principles, rather than to impose the views or arbitrary will of any 'party' or 'interest'."* ANANDA COOMARASWAMY

# SHELMERDINE

## BY MISS PRISCILLA LANGRIDGE

### CHAPTER IV

#### A GAME OF CHESS

THE redeeming feature of her regular sessions with Flavia was, in Shelmerdine's eyes, that they were mysterious. It would have been easy and pleasant to have become a fully-fledged member of the Inner Circle, sharing every spare moment with the twins and Allison. In the eyes of the form it would have been an enviable position; but it would, Shelmerdine felt, have made her rather too much a known quantity. As it was, she flitted in and out of the Circle like an elegant butterfly, now joining in the jolliest of japes like a true third-former, but often unaccountably absent upon some business of her own. Consequently, the rather enigmatic face which she had presented to the form upon their first encounter was not wholly supplanted by the more domesticated and approachable *persona* of "Jolly Old Shelmerdine".

Under normal circumstances the secret of Shelmerdine's most-nightly disappearances would soon have been discovered. It is not easy to keep that kind of secret in a school like Granchester. But Flavia was so intensely private. She had made neither friends nor any sort of a mark at Granchester. Her movements were unknown and unnoticed and always had been. The very fact that she imagined that the secret would be possible to keep showed how little she knew of the general life of the school which had for eighteen months been her home. Shelmerdine, of course, was much more in the public eye, but stealth was her *forté*. If she did not wish people to see something, then they did not see it.

Shelmerdine's private moments were not restricted to her study sessions. On the first Saturday after her arrival she got leave to go into the town on a private mission about which even Flavia knew nothing. It was her first debriefing with Miss Chess. The rendezvous was a tea shop in Granchester High Road called The Copper Kettle.

The School was not far from the outskirts of Granchester town. Even for the unathletic Shelmerdine the walk was not a daunting one. The School was built on a hill, and as one descended into the town, one had a splendid view over the patchwork country-

side which surrounded it. The first thing that struck Shelmerdine about the town itself was an extraordinary old-worldness which she had never encountered in her own day. It was not simply the near-absence of motor traffic, nor the fact that there were very few "modern" buildings. Somehow there was an air of small-country-townness—of rural completeness and self-identity—which was hard to define but definitely there. In her day such places had been to a large extent hangers-on of the life and thoughts of the big cities. Perhaps it was the absence of television and wireless which made the difference—if they were absent. She really did not know.

As in the School, there was a feeling of continuity with the past. A sense that the long and winding road which ran through history and through the present had somehow made a bridge over the little aberration of her own age.

The road that led down down into the town seemed at first like a wide, hard dirt track, but after a way, Shelmerdine realised that it had once been a tarmac road. In many places it was covered by a layer of earth. In others, potholes had been filled with soil and gravel. Its crumbling edges had been encroached upon by weeds and nettles as had many cracks in its surface, but it still retained the hardness and smoothness of the old road. It reminded Shelmerdine (though it was not actually straight) of the straightness of the Roman roads, so very different from the "rolling English road" which came before and after them.

As she came into the town itself, the hybrid dirt-and-tarmac gave way to cobbles. Not the round, bumpy kind, but smooth, flat, carefully fitted stones—quite new. The tea shop itself was a stone and timber building with a copper kettle hanging outside beneath a sign proclaiming its name.

"Miss Shelmerdine Bingham?" asked a very smart young waitress, perhaps two years younger than herself, as she entered.

"Pop on the potato."

"Miss Chess awaits you upstairs, miss," said the girl, and gave Shelmerdine such a sunny smile that she could not but return it.

As she mounted the heavy oaken stairway she noticed something rather curious about both it and the great stones of which the wall was constructed.

Miss Chess was seated at a window table, looking out over the street. No doubt she had watched Shelmerdine's approach. She was wearing a claret-coloured coat and skirt with the fashionable collar, much wider than Shel-

Shelmerdine's own. Her hair was up in a tight bun but with long curls of her dark-and-steely-grey hair looping at each side of her face. She looked very different from before. Older in a way; younger in another. Very much like an aunt who might be having tea with a Granchester girl at the Copper Kettle. Shelmerdine took a few moments to digest the transformation.

"Sit down, my dear, sit down." The older woman took a little gold fob-watch from an inner pocket. "Exactly on time. School has improved your punctuality at any rate." What on earth did she know about Shelmerdine's punctuality? A wild phantasy raced through her head that Miss Chess might refuse to acknowledge their previous arrangement; might treat her as the niece she was supposed to be; talk about her illness; fuss about her academic progress. She took the initiative.

"What a fascinating building. Stone and timber. You can see at this window-sill that the walls are nearly two feet thick. It could easily be mediæval. But it's new, isn't it?"

"Well, not that new," said Miss Chess. "It was built over ten years ago."

"Hard to believe," said Shelmerdine.

They were seated opposite one another. Miss Chess laid her hand upon a chair that stood between them at the side of the table.

"Look at this chair," she said. "It isn't Sheraton, but it is a splendid piece of craftsmanship. When you and I were your age you couldn't have found work like this outside an antique shop; and then the price would have been anatomical—"

"I know—an arm and a leg."

"How nice to talk to a girl who remembers the old jokes! But the point is that you should not let the surface of things fool you too completely. A lot of things are done by machine these days; and when they are they are done so completely by machine that human beings hardly come into it at all. We do not need factories any more. It leaves people free to do the things that people do best. The things that only people can do and that give people true satisfaction. Real craftsmanship. Real service. The things which make life decent and worthwhile. You remember people used to talk about a 'leisure state'? Well, we could have had it, I suppose; but nobody wanted it. What they wanted was fulfilling work which—"

"But look here, young Shelmerdine. You should have read about all this. What happened to that book I gave you?"

"Well, you know what school is. I've hardly had a moment to look at it since I got off the train."

"I suppose you were too busy to eat the chocolates too."

"Yes. Funnily enough I haven't eaten any of them since I got off the train either."

"I can imagine why. But down to business. Have you anything to report about Cara Leonie?"

"As a matter of fact I have. You see, I happened to steal her fountain pen and—"

"Shelmerdine! You simply must not do things like that at Granchester. You will spoil everything."

"I was only borrowing it really."

"And how many other things have you borrowed since you were there?"

"Well, there was the School fencing cup—and, of course, I had to borrow the keys in order to get it. And I borrowed Mademoiselle's spectacles the night after I scamped my French exercises. The poor old thing won't admit she is as blind as a bat without them. She just ended up saying that my work wasn't that bad after all. And then there was—"

"Very well, that will do for now."

"Anyway, it's just as well I did borrow Cara's pen." Bother! Just as she thought she had everything under control she found herself talking like a schoolgirl to an aunt. She made a determined change in her tone. "I discovered a secret chamber inside the pen containing a number of cut diamonds. I couldn't tell for certain, but there was certainly a lot of money there. I replaced them and restored the pen to her. She is none the wiser."

"Let us hope not; but thank you. The information is very intriguing. Keep watching Miss Leonie. Discreetly, though. She is very sharp indeed."

"Um—there is a touch of a problem there. You see, I'm not in her form any more. I hardly see her."

"Really? And in what form are you?"

Shelmerdine felt herself colour. "The Third." Miss Chess smiled broadly but not unkindly. "Of course. Educational Standards have changed somewhat since our day, have they not?"

"I think I'm catching up quite quickly. The Head says I've the ability and I'm getting some coaching from a very bright little thing called Flavia Randall and—" She paused, realising that she was sliding back into gymslip mode.

Miss Chess's voice became soothing,

though still in a brisk sort of way. "Don't fret, old chap. Just do your best. That's all anyone can ask of you. I am sure you'll soon get a remove, but even if you did not I should not mind so long as I felt confident that you were doing your level best."

Shelmerdine gasped inwardly. She had done it. She had done just what she had feared. She was talking simply as an aunt to a schoolgirl. Shelmerdine pulled things back.

"Look, you must have done a fair bit of wangling to get me into Granchester at all. Can't you use whatever influence you have to induce the Head to put me back into the Sixth?"

"I fear I have used *all* the influence I have just to get you in. I should not like to trespass any further upon Miss Tavistock's good nature."

"But look, what about watching Cara Leonie? That is what I'm there for, isn't it?"

"Oh, try not to worry so much, child. I trust your famous luck even if you do not. And try not to say 'look' like that. It does not sound well."

"But really, Miss Chess——"

"Fuss, fuss, fuss. You don't want to make yourself ill again, do you?"

There was a strange, half panic-stricken look in Shelmerdine's eyes. Miss Chess looked straight into it and smiled. "You do take yourself seriously, don't you?"

"Do I?" asked Shelmerdine, who had never thought that she did.

"You do in a way, but I am not sure that it is the right way.

"More tea?"

"Thank you."

"Do you feel up to coming for a nice long walk with me this afternoon?"

Shelmerdine wrinkled her nose in that engaging little-girl smile. "Now who's worrying? I am completely recovered, you know."

# SHELMERDINE

## BY MISS PRISCILLA LANGRIDGE

### CHAPTER V

#### A MUSICAL INTERLUDE

THE following day was Sunday. Shelmerdine had noticed that this was often the case following a Saturday. Rising Bell was, in consequence, half an hour later than it was during the week; but Shelmerdine had now acquired the habit of awakening at a fixed time each morning and she was not one of those who could turn over for an extra few minutes' sleep. She propped herself up on her pillow (she had always been accustomed to two pillows before now, but such a thing would have been considered decadent at Granchester) and surveyed her little empire. Only a few feet larger than the bed itself—and that was small enough—it was bounded by walls of print curtain. A tiny chest of drawers contained a few clothes. Her coat and skirt, together with a matching grey mac hung in a curtained-off 'wardrobe' corner. Her hat lay on its board top. There was a little bedside table with her shoes beneath it and Miss Chess's volume upon it. And that was the sum total of all that she could call her own in the world. Except that the furniture and curtains were not really hers, of course.

There was a time when such a prospect would have filled her with gloom; and there was another time, much more recently, when the idea of starting afresh with nothing had represented freedom, pride and self-confidence. But now, as she surveyed the limits of her tiny domain, it was neither of these moods which came upon her. Instead she

was seized by a curious state of mind, half wistful and half contented. Behind her was the massive stone wall of Granchester's west wing, and it made her curtained-off cubicle seem a flimsy and artificial thing within the mighty symmetry of these ancient walls. Shelmerdine smiled without knowing why. She felt that she was in a state of emptiness. She was empty of any definite feeling or opinion about her position in life. She did not really know what she was here for and she did not mind. Perhaps Miss Chess had revived her faith in her luck. In any case, she felt that her emptiness must be filled in due course.

In fact it was filled rather sooner than she expected by a quiet explosion at the parting of her curtain. The explosion had a name. Two names in point of fact: Dot and Carrie.

"Sorry to wake you," said Dot.

"You didn't."

"But," continued Carrie, unperturbed, "we didn't want to tell you at breakfast—just in case."

"Pair with Alison and try to get as near to the head of the croc. as you can," said Dot.

"And then just follow us."

"Must fly. We've got to tell Alison too."

Alison was in another dormitory and any flitting between dorms after Rising Bell—which was now perilously close—would be sure to be noticed. Any other two girls would have separated, one to tell Alison and the other to tell Shelmerdine; but of course that would never have occurred to the twins.

Though gabbled, the meaning of the message was clear. As the lower school formed up for the procession down the hill to the church of St. Cecilia, Shelmerdine and Alison partnered each other and got themselves as near as possible to the front of the line, just behind Dot and Carrie. These latter had refused to say anything about the matter over

breakfast; refused even to acknowledge that there was a matter to say anything about. Whether they regarded such extreme caution as necessary or whether it was all part of the dramatic build-up was open to speculation.

At first it seemed that the whole affair was going to be a fizzle. The twins simply walked down the hill, through the cobbled High Road and into the churchyard. They walked through the church gates and up the centre aisle. They filed into their pews at the very front. And then, without pausing, as the procession filed into place behind them they walked out at the further end and, mingling with the incoming crowd of churchgoers, slipped quietly out through the door of the transept. The mistress in charge, separated from them by some fifty girls, saw nothing.

They continued their stately pace until they were behind the church, whereupon Dot turned back to Shelmerdine and Alison and said: "Alright, let's rabbit!" The twins took off like the aforesaid fauna down a maze of twisting backstreets, hotly pursued by the other half of the Inner Circle. After a minute or so they came to a breathless halt beside an ancient, white, motorised van. Dot pulled open the passenger door and scrambled in. The others followed until all four were packed along the long seat beside the driver, a round-faced, bewhiskered fellow of about fifty.

"About time too," he observed. "Where to, miss?" Dot directed him to a road out of town in a different direction from the School, without giving any specific destination. The engine clunked and wheezed into life. Alison squealed excitedly.

"A motor car!" she said. "Wherever did you find it?"

"We had to," said Dot airily. She had driven in motor vehicles before, and better ones than this. "It's got suspension."

"Sort of," said Carrie, as it bounced along the cobbles.

"'Ere, less o' that!" remonstrated the driver.

Granchester town lay in a river valley and the route Dot had chosen took them along the valley, round a wind in the river and into a quiet woody spot. From here, Dot directed the driver down a little track among the trees.

"We have to get it out here," she announced.

"Get it out 'ere?" exclaimed the driver. "Don't tell me it needs to relieve itself!" He chuckled heartily at this and then, remem-

bering his company, cleared his throat and made his way round to the back of the van.

It was a large van of the kind of which the back opens down to form a ramp. Inside were two lads and a large object covered in a white tarpaulin. At the command of the driver, the object was wheeled out onto the grass.

"What now?" he asked, growing more visibly bemused by the minute.

Dot opened her purse and took out half-a-crown. She had decided in advance that a little extra payment might lubricate the wheels at this stage in the proceedings. "Perhaps," she said, attempting to emulate Shelmerdine at her most grown-up and competent, "Perhaps you would care to take your chaps for a little spin and meet us back here in, say, ten minutes." The driver did so, though not without a certain amount of mumbling.

"And now——" said Dot momentously.

"Voila!" said Carrie, whipping off the tarpaulin to reveal the vi form piano.

"What more can I lose?" demanded Shelmerdine reproachfully. "You have robbed me of the title of Granchester's champion borer-in one masterful stroke."

"I say," said Carrie, "We forgot to bring piano stools."

"Never mind that," said Dot. She opened a small hamper which had been inside the back of the van. Inside was a bottle of ginger beer and four glasses.

"No thanks," said Alison. "I never drink this early in the day." Everyone laughed. The fact of the matter was that Alison's family had been deeply affected by the Evangelical revival of the late 'nineties and she was feeling rather uneasy about scampering church for something rather like a party. The sacrifice of the ginger beer, however, salved her conscience enough to allow her to enjoy the proceedings.

The twins quaffed deeply and then set about the keyboard with great vigour and equal skill. As musical scholars, Miss Maitland did not rank them terribly highly, but they would certainly have brought the house down at the Hare and Hounds. Even Shelmerdine knew the words by now and the Inner Circle's four-part version of the catchy chorus soared to new and dizzying heights:

*"When I hear it I'm a slave,  
I know I just can't behave,  
My spine starts to tingle and my fingers  
wave,  
Oo-oo-oo-oo"*

*When you hear that sizzling song,  
Catch the beat and shuffle along,  
Can't resist, the rhythm's too strong  
And we'll both dance away."*

Dot refilled the glass, and raising hers, declared: "To Granchester!"

"To Granchester!" echoed the others and once again raised three hearty cheers. This time Shelmerdine joined them. Not long since, she would have felt that joining in such a cheer would have been one of the most embarrassing things she could imagine. Embarrassment is a curious thing. It exercises a tyranny far greater than we are often aware over both our actions and our thoughts, and as Shelmerdine strained her lungs with a full-blooded "Hurrah!" she felt a strange sense of release within her. She felt like a Gulliver, not yet able to sit upright, but having snapped the first few of the Lilliputian ropes, leaving some part of her being free to move.

The driver's spin took somewhat longer than the stated ten minutes, giving time for more verses, more ginger beer and some explanation.

"You see, we just couldn't have done it at school," said Carrie.

"There's no time when the noise wouldn't bring half the Staff and prefects in the house about our ears."

"And our mother always used to say——"

"If you must play noisy games, go off somewhere out of earshot."

"One can never go far wrong if one takes one's mother's advice, can one?"

"I say, when is that van coming back?"

"I suppose it is coming back," said Alison. "That fellow looked rather queer when he left."

"Rubbish. He took my half-crown," said Dot, more definitely than she felt.

"Well, he'd better come soon," said Carrie, "Or the service will be over. We've got to slip back into the procession at the church gate or we'll be missed."

"Hold on," said Shelmerdine. "I think I hear it."

"Yes, that's it," said Carrie. "Couldn't mistake that row."

The van drew up and the driver emerged.

"Now, we've got to do this quickly," said Dot. "Get the Joanna back in, drop us off where you met us and then get it back to the Music Room."

"Now just a minute, miss——"

"But we don't have a minute," objected

Dot, desperately.

"Well, you'll 'ave to find one, 'cause we needs an answer out of you, miss, don't we, lads?" The lads gave the solicited moral support by nodding their assent. "We don't know what's goin' on 'ere, and we don't want to know. But what we do want to know is: is this bein' done on the orders of the guy'nors up at the school like wot you told me?"

"I never told you that," protested Dot.

"It was strongly implied," insisted the driver.

"I don't see how you can say that."

"Well, is it or ain't it?"

"No."

"We thought as much. Now, we does a lot of deliveries for your school, we does. We can't afford to go gettin' in Miss Tavistock's bad books. So we ain't goin' back in there with this 'ere pianer."

"But——"

"Our duty is clear, miss. Our duty is to go to Miss Tavistock and tell 'er all about it and 'ow we thought we was actin' on 'er orders till we learned different."

"But——"

"But we ain't goin' to do that, are we, lads?" The lads shook their heads. "No, we ain't. We was all young once. We'll drive you and the pianer back to the service entrance at the School, and you can get it back from there. And that's a lot more than wot we oughter be doin'. And we'll only do that on two conditions. The first is that if you get copped you won't tell nobody who drove you."

"Of course not," said Dot, somewhat offended. "Do I look like a sneak?"

"No, you don't, miss," admitted the driver. "But then you don't look like some one wot takes pianers into the middle o' nowhere for a constitutional and then takes them back again."

"And what is the other condition?"

"It'll cost you another ten bob."

Dot looked into her purse and made a hopeless gesture at Carrie. Carrie looked into hers and between them they managed to give him the amount in silver, pennies and half-pennies.

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The service entrance at Granchester stood at the head of a long white passage which was forbidden to juniors. The doors on either side led into kitchens, laundry rooms and other such places. It was always hot there and always filled with a curious mixture of smells. Along the centre of the ceiling ran a

discoloured white serpent of strip-lighting which, in days gone by, had been used to bathe the white walls in a cold glare. Such obsolete fittings had been removed in most parts of the building, but here nobody had troubled to do it.

The Inner Circle wheeled their tarpaulined burden down the corridor. It made Shelmerdine think of doctors wheeling a patient to the operating theatre. The girls exchanged grins, but the atmosphere was very tense. At any moment somebody might step out of one of the doors. They were thankful for the continual clatter coming from the kitchens, which effectively covered the rumble of the piano's casters.

At last they made it to the end of the service corridor.

"Well," said Shelmerdine cheerfully, "That's the easy part over." And it was. Now they had somehow to get the thing down a staff corridor, past Big Hall, past three classrooms, up two shallow steps and into the Music Room. It was true that not many staff would be about, that the classrooms and Big Hall ought to be empty and that the Music Room had double doors; but it still seemed rather a remote chance that they would get the whole distance without running into anybody in authority. If only they had managed to get back while everybody was still in church.

"I'll go on ahead," suggested Alison. "If I see anyone I'll shout 'Coo-ee'!"

"Good girl," said Dot.

Alison sauntered slowly down the corridor looking exaggeratedly nonchalant. She did not actually gaze at the ceiling and whistle but she might just as well have done. The staff corridor seemed three times as long as it had ever been before, easily beating its previous record for length which had been attained two years ago, when Alison had had to see Miss Martindale about boot-blacking a lavatory seat.

She reached the end of the corridor without mishap. She only hoped the rumbling piano would do as well. Miraculously, the large concourse outside Big Hall was deserted, though there were several approaches along which somebody might appear at any moment. But as she turned down the final corridor she saw somebody coming towards her. It was Miranda Summers, probably the least formidable of the School's prefects, but a prefect nonetheless; and with an offence of this magnitude, any prefect meant discovery and ruin.

"Hello, you young blot," called Miranda.

"Where on earth did you get to after church? Miss Cartstairs is going round the proverbial, looking for you."

"Coo-ee!" cried Alison in a loud but somewhat strangulated voice.

It took a lot to annoy Miranda Summers, but Alison was making headway. "Look, I say, there's no call to start making animal noises at me. Now round up those other blots and report yourselves to Miss Cartstairs. And, bother me, I don't see why you shouldn't take an order mark for cheek." This last seemed to be rather a novel idea to Miranda.

"Yes, Miranda," said Alison.

"Alright. That's all. You can get out of the way now."

Alison stood dumbly blocking the path.

"I said get out of the way," said Miranda, and moved forward, pushing Alison bodily backward into the concourse. There was no sign of the piano or of the others, either there or along any of the visible corridors. The only place they could have taken it was through the great doors of Big Hall. Alison breathed a sigh of relief which died halfway down her throat as she saw Miranda making for those doors. She knew there was no other exit from the hall large enough to get the piano through.

"Um, Miranda," called Alison.

"What is it?"

"You can't go in there."

"Whyever not?"

If only Shelmerdine were here. She would think of something on the spot. "Wet paint," said Alison, lamely.

"What utter drivel. Nobody's painted this place in years. Are you trying to make me cross or something?" She marched into Big Hall, followed by Alison.

The hall was empty and looked much as it always did. The great platform at the front. The raised dais on which Miss Maitland played the piano for hymns or the School Anthem. Normally Miranda would have sauntered through without noticing anything, but Alison's manner had made her decidedly suspicious.

"I say, blot. Have you any idea why there are two pianos on that dais?"

"Umm," faltered Alison, squeezing her fingernails into her clammy palms. "Umm, aren't they always there?"

Miranda considered the matter for some seconds. "Yes, probably are," she said, and toolled off through a side door on her illicit short-cut to the Senior Common Room, forgetting the whole affair.

# SHELMERDINE

## BY MISS PRISCILLA LANGRIDGE

### CHAPTER VI

#### SIGNS OF THINGS TO COME

SHELMERDINE emerged unscathed from the affair of the VI form piano. The piano itself was successfully returned to the Music Room, and, while the twins and Alison were punished for absenting themselves from the walk home (Miss Carstairs had assumed that they had been in church for the service and there seemed no reason to disappoint her), Shelmerdine was considered too new and inexperienced in school ways to be fully responsible. The others were much castigated for leading her astray.

Nonetheless, she was acutely conscious that her Hope Carrington Cup gambit had been decisively trumped, if the reader will forgive me for mixing my Hoyle. She was determined to regain her position; but in the meanwhile she regarded the piano affair with unstinting admiration. On Monday evening she told the story to Flavia and was particularly impressed to discover that it required very little retouching in the cause of dramatic effect. This was, in fact, its first retelling, for the Inner Circle had agreed to tell nobody for a few days—just in case—knowing how these things spread. But Flavia was so out of touch that Shelmerdine felt that in her case there could be no harm.

Flavia's reaction to the story surprised Shelmerdine somewhat. Her luminescent blue eyes grew huge and round as she listened. At first Shelmerdine thought that she was shocked or horrified, but she was not. She was enthralled. As Shelmerdine finished, her whole being seemed to glow with excitement.

"How glorious," she said.

"It was rather a show."

"And imagine cozening Miranda like that. I bet it was your idea to put the piano on the dais."

Shelmerdine smiled. Jolly of Flavia to spot her one bit of credit in the affair. "Bit of a sitting duck, I'm afraid, but it was jinky."

"How glorious," repeated Flavia.

"Well, well, you surprise me, Shorty. I didn't think you'd particularly swoop for this sort of business."

Flavia said nothing in reply to this. Perhaps she was surprised herself, though there was really no reason to be. Everything in which Shelmerdine was involved was bathed, for Flavia, in a romantic glow; but beyond that, the swashbuckling spirit lay never far beneath her quiet exterior.

Shelmerdine filled the silence by casting her eyes over Flavia's pictures. Practically every inch of wall in her tiny room which was not covered with books was covered with pictures. None was very large. They ranged from very small to medium-small. Most of them looked old and often rather foreign; perhaps east European. Shelmerdine was very far from being an expert on such things, but from the frames alone it was clear that some of them were very valuable.

Flavia followed Shelmerdine's glance. "Do you like this picture?" she asked, taking down the one at which Shelmerdine happened to be looking at the time. It showed a shepherdess leading sheep upon a hill. In the background was a country town. It was either mediæval or early Renaissance, according to Shelmerdine's guess. Everything in it was exceptionally clear and bright, yet at the same time the whole was pervaded with a wonderful tranquillity. The whole picture, frame included, was only a little larger than the palm of Shelmerdine's hand, yet it seemed like a little world that one might walk into. Shelmerdine thought that its life was due not only to the skill of the artist, but also to long and loving contemplation.

"I've had it since I was a little child," said Flavia.

"It is very lovely," said Shelmerdine sincerely, although she normally had no great appreciation for the visual arts.

"It is yours," said Flavia.

"No," said Shelmerdine firmly, replacing it on the wall.

"Why not?" asked Flavia, her eyes misting over as they had on that first night. "Surely you are not one of those who finds it hard to accept a gift."

"No," replied Shelmerdine, "but I should

not appreciate it nearly as well as you do."

\* \* \*

The moon was nearly full and very bright. Its light penetrated the curtains in Shelmerdine's dorm, so that a pale light was reflected into her cubicle from the ceiling.

"Bother," she thought. "I could have done without a moon tonight. Still, it helps me to keep awake until I leave."

That in itself was no small blessing, for while lights-out was at nine thirty, it was fully half past eleven before Shelmerdine thought it prudent to dress herself and tiptoe out of the dormitory, down the stairs and through a side door into the cool night air. She kept to the grass to avoid the crunching gravel of the path until she was outside the main gate and then began her brisk walk into town. Certainly it was fun by moonlight, even if it did add to the risk a little.

"You must admit," she had said to the twins at breakfast, that I did you proud with my last dare. Now I think it is fair to say that you owe me a good'un to match it. A triple-X corker."

This thought must also have occurred to the twins, because they were ready with a dare that was at least triple-X. Possibly quadruple.

As she arrived in town, the last patrons were leaving the Hare and Hounds. A local bobby touched his helmet to them. Clearly they were not too particular about the licensing laws here, bother them. Shelmerdine kept to the shadows. She checked the site where a new stone building was under construction. Yes. There was the ladder she would need to borrow, but there was no point in taking it yet. She would have to give the landlord and landlady of the Hare and Hounds time to clear up and get to bed.

A stroll about the town seemed to be in order. A discreet one, though. Wouldn't do to be spotted.

Everything was closed, which made for a fairly dull walk until she came to Quincy's. Quincy's was the town's only casino. It stayed open until the small hours. Shelmerdine had never been attracted by casinos in her own time, but she was intrigued to see what one might be like now. She might have thrown caution to the winds and given it a pop were it not for the certainty that, wearing her school macintosh, she would be thrown out.

She stood for some minutes watching the various patrons as they entered. They seemed very formal. She noticed that the silk hat was once more *de rigueur* with gentleman's evening wear. It was a little taller and thinner than it had been when it was last among us, return-

ing, in fact, toward its origins. She was able to study the style at some length on the head of one man who stood outside Quincy's during the whole period of her observation.

She was just deciding that it must be about time to set about her evening's business when she saw that the man was being joined by a young woman dressed all in black and with a black veil over her face. There was something distinctly familiar about the woman. For a moment, Shelmerdine could not place it; then, at once, she knew. Even though the couple were now disappearing up the stairs of the casino there was no doubt of it.

The young woman was Cara Leonie.

"*Quelle rum go,*" thought Shelmerdine. "Is she meeting some sinister contact, or simply addicted to playing the tables? Or both? And what do I do about it? I can't get in. Probably wouldn't help if I did, and I'm bothered if I'll wait about for her to come out. Oh well, about my business, I suppose."

\* \* \*

"So you've really got it," said Dot as the Inner Circle made its way to its favourite tree.

"Of course," replied Shelmerdine, "but I nearly didn't bother to bring it home. They're bigger than they look when you get them down, y'know."

They had ducked under the overhanging foliage to enter their natural tent, and there it was, standing on top of the wall and propped against the tree trunk. The sign of the Hare and Hounds.

"But isn't it splendid," said Carrie.

"I say! You chaps!" The voice was accompanied by the sound of heavy feet rushing towards their hideout. Hastily the four emerged. The owner of both voice and feet was Viola Dunwoody, a gawky but generally affable member of the Third. "The Head wants to see all of you right away. Sounds serious."

"Golliwogs!" said Alison as they hurried on their way. "She can't know about the sign, can she?"

# SHELMERDINE

## BY MISS PRISCILLA LANGRIDGE

### CHAPTER VII

#### ROUGH JUSTICE

Miss Tavistock was grave. "Alison Clarke, Dorothy and Caroline Fielding, Shelmerdine Bingham. I am not going to beat about the bush. All four of you are well aware that that VI form piano is not permitted to be touched by any girl who is not studying for the senior music examination. All of you, except perhaps Shelmerdine, know that I take a very serious view of any violation of this rule.

"But you did rather more than simply touching or playing the instrument, did you not? You removed it from its place and conveyed it in an old and rickety motor van over a mile from the School. The surface has been chipped in a number of places and it will certainly need retuning. It is not possible yet to say whether any more serious damage has been done. Have you anything to say in your defence?"

"Please, Miss Tavistock," said Dot. "It was Caroline and I who were wholly responsible. We asked the others to come with us, but they knew nothing of what we had done until we actually got there."

Angry as she was, Miss Tavistock was always fair-minded. She realised that if what Dorothy said was true—and while she was a madcap, she was certainly not a liar—Alison and Shelmerdine could have done little other

than they did without breaking the schoolgirl code against sneaking. They should not, of course, have absented themselves from the church procession, but they had already been punished for that.

"Alison and Shelmerdine, did either of you touch the piano?"

"Yes," replied both.

"Did you play it?"

"No."

"What did you do with it?"

"We helped to get it back to the School without being seen," said Alison.

"Then you may go."

The next quarter of an hour was one of the most uncomfortable that the twins had ever endured. It built up to the following *œ*conomic but very effective climax:

"You will both be caned; you will have detention every Saturday afternoon until half-term and you are gated until further notice."

\* \* \*

"What I want to know," said Dot in the Common Room, "is how on earth we were found out."

"Yes," said Carrie. "If Miranda had guessed she would have reported us straight away; and anyway, she couldn't have known as much about it as Miss Tavistock did."

"Somebody must have told her," said Alison. "That is the only possibility."

"Well, we haven't told a soul about it, have we, Carrie?"

"Certainly not. What about you, Alison?"

"Not a word to anyone."

"And Shelmerdine?"

Shelmerdine's mouth was set firmly. "I have told no one except Flavia Randall."

"What!" exclaimed Carrie.

"You told Flavia Randall?"

"Flavia Randall of all people!"

"What do you mean, 'of all people'?" demanded Shelmerdine.

"Well, she isn't even one of the chaps," said Dot.

"If she had been one of the chaps she'd have told the whole form," said Shelmerdine.

"So instead she has just told Miss Tavistock," retorted Dot coldly.

"Bilge," said Shelmerdine.

"Bilge yourself," said Dot. "What do you know about Flavia Randall? You've only just arrived. She's a queer fish and she must be on some sort of special terms with the Head. She has her own room, you know. Nobody in the Third has ever been allowed that. Of all the people you might have told you picked the absolute worst."

"Bilge," reiterated Shelmerdine.

"You shouldn't have done it," said a reproachful Carrie. "We promised not to tell any one."

"I'm sorry," said Shelmerdine stiffly.

"Being sorry isn't enough," stormed Dot. "A gentleman's word is her bond."

"We didn't pledge our word in that way."

"Oh yes we did."

"No more than we did over the Hope Carrington Cup, and that got all over the form at a time when I didn't know anyone else to tell."

"But this was much more important."

"But no more or less a matter of honour."

"Are you questioning our honour, Birmingham?"

"Are you questioning mine, Fielding?"

"Can you fence?"

"No."

"Bother. Then I can't challenge you."

"I can shoot," said Shelmerdine dangerously.

It took some courage for Alison to intervene, but courage was not a thing she lacked. "Stop it, both of you! Shelmerdine is right. We did tell people about the Cup when we said we wouldn't. It isn't a matter of honour. Nobody needs to be mortally offended. Of course she shouldn't have spoken to Flavia Randall, but remember she hasn't been here a month yet. She couldn't possibly have known this might happen. Now are you two going to shake hands, or do Carrie and I have to fetch jugs of water to separate a pair of fighting cats?"

The antagonists continued to glare at one another, but rather uncertainly now.

"I'll fetch a jug of water from my washstand," said Carrie with as light a laugh as she could manage. As Alison had guessed, she did not like this row and wanted to end it. The defection of her twin took all the fight out of Dot. If Carrie wanted to make peace, so would she. She thrust out a hand.

"Sorry, old thing. I'm given to tantrums every now and then. Family failing."

"No worse than mine," said Shelmerdine, grasping the hand warmly. She suddenly realised how much she would have hated to lose the friendship of the twins.

\* \* \*

Shelmerdine knocked on Flavia's door. She was now quite resigned to the idea of their regular sessions after prep. Normally the door opened immediately to reveal a shining, eager little face. Today Shelmerdine waited nearly half a minute and the face when it appeared was drawn and deathly white.

"Why, Shorty, what on earth's the matter?"

Flavia said nothing, as if she did not trust herself to speak. She stepped aside to let Shelmerdine pass into the room, and then closed the door firmly behind her.

The room looked like a grotesque parody of the familiar little haven Shelmerdine had visited last night. The pictures were all turned to face the wall or else hung upside down. The bedclothes were on the floor in place of Flavia's little Persian rug. The rug was hung up at the window in place of the curtains. The bookshelves had been emptied and Flavia's books had been piled up into a great pyramid on the bare mattress. The velvet curtains had been draped over it and it was crowned with the vase of flowers from the top of the bureau. The bureau itself lay open and all the little drawers and compartments in which Flavia so carefully arranged all her things had been emptied to create a jumbled mess piled up on her big leather-covered blotter.

Shelmerdine surveyed the room carefully. Somebody had certainly "ragged" it with admirable thoroughness; but she was pretty sure, on first glance, that nothing had actually been damaged. Even the ink pots, though precariously balanced on top of the pile in the bureau, were closed, upright and full. Shelmerdine moved them onto a safer surface.

"It's alright, Shorty. It looks a mess, but there's no real damage. We'll have to scratch tonight's study, of course, but I can promise that by the time you snuggle up, everything will be just as it was."

"But—— you don't—— under——" Flavia had been right not to trust herself to speak. Now that she tried she found that she only opened the gates for a flood of awful, shuddering sobs. Shelmerdine put her arms around her, feeling tall and strong and protective.

"Understand? Yes, I do." She understood all too well that what mattered so terribly to Flavia was the violation of her sanctum. She had never really come to school at all. She had simply moved her life from wherever she had been before into this room. It represented not merely privacy to her, nor even security. It was something more than that. No other girl had ever been inside it until she met Shelmerdine and now what had happened was to her a terrible, terrible violation of her very being. Whoever had done this can have had no idea of how dreadfully it would hurt Flavia. Nobody in the world knew that except Shelmerdine; and nobody had asked her. To them it was just an everyday rag and probably far less than Flavia deserved for the crime of which she had been convicted without trial.

Shelmerdine's promise was not fulfilled. The room was not back in order by bedtime. For nearly three quarters of an hour, she could do nothing but nurse Flavia through torrent after torrent of bitter, convulsive weeping. They had only time to make the bed and restore the scantiest semblance of order before Last Bell.

\* \* \*

Mademoiselle was down with a slight chill the next morning and, the first lesson being French, the Third Form had a period of unsupervised reading, which was lucky for Flavia. She arrived some minutes late, having slipped back to her room after prayers to finish the superficial tidying of her room to a point where her bed-maker would not notice anything amiss.

As she entered the room, the air was filled with a low hissing sound, which continued steadily as she made her way down the aisle of desks to her place. At last her nerves, sorely frayed by last night's events, gave way. She turned to Viola Dunwoody, who was usually quite friendly to her.

"What is the matter? Why are they hissing me?" Viola stared through her as if she was not there.

"I believe Flavia asked you something, Viola," drawled Shelmerdine. "Have you no manners?"

"She's in Coventry," said Viola.

"I don't recall the form deciding that," said Shelmerdine.

"It didn't need to," said Alison. "No decent girl will speak to her now."

Shelmerdine sprang to her feet, seized Flavia's wrist and strode with her to the front of the class. Taking the mistress's place, she turned to face the form.

"In England a chap is counted innocent until proven guilty," she said. Nobody said anything. "If you want to send Flavia Randall to Coventry, you'll have to send me with her."

"But why?" asked Carrie despairingly.

"Because she is my friend." It was the first time in her life that Shelmerdine had acknowledged someone as a friend.

"You will have to choose between Flavia and us," flashed Dot.

"Wrong," said Shelmerdine. "I have chosen."

"Why, Shelmerdine? Why?" implored Carrie as she strode back to her place. Shelmerdine looked through her without answering but Carrie did not fail to see the sadness in her eyes. She was not acting in anger as she had done yesterday. She was doing what she felt she must.

The rest of the day was intolerably dull for Shelmerdine. Ironically it was she alone who really suffered from being in Coventry. Once she had recovered from the initial shock of the thing, it did not make much difference to Flavia. She had very little converse with the rest of the form in any case. Shelmerdine, on the other hand, pined for the lively company of the twins and Alison. She did not even, to any great extent, seek solace in spending more time with Flavia. She liked Flavia well enough in her way, but felt that they had only a certain amount in common.

So she found herself, once again, "The Cat that Walked by Itself". It was only now she realised how alone she had been since her arrival at Granchester and how little she actually enjoyed being alone, despite the fact that she had chosen to isolate herself from her fellows throughout most of her young life. The truth was that she was an intensely gregarious person, but she refused to compromise her standards for the sake of companionship. In the twins and Alison, and even, in her own way, in Flavia, she found, for the first time, companions with whom friendship involved no such compromise.

By the ending of the day, Shelmerdine was feeling so desolate that she might have cried; but it was many long years since her feelings had found release in tears. It was the first night since her arrival that the twins had not popped their heads around her curtain to say a last goodnight.

She recalled that she had been intending to return the sign to the Hare and Hounds that night, but she could not be bothered. "Let some one find it," she thought. "I don't care."

But as time wore on and sleep seemed impossible, Shelmerdine decided that she might as well take the air again as she had last night. Once again she dressed and slipped out by the same side door, but she had no intention of taking that heavy sign back into town. Instead she decided to wander down the valley gardens which she had not yet seen by moonlight. As she was rounding the house toward the head of the valley, she saw a figure up ahead moving silently about on one of the lawns, looking up at the windows of the School. It was Cara Leonie.

"Applestrudel! I wonder if I'm even luckier than I thought or whether she's out and about every night," thought Shelmerdine. "No wonder she always looks so frazzled. She probably never gets more than two hours sleep."

Shelmerdine found a shadowy corner and sank silently into a sitting position. She re-

mained quite motionless as she watched Cara Leonie. It was difficult to tell exactly what she was doing. Possibly measuring the distance between one of the windows and a terrace which was level with it some three hundred yards away. It was not only what she was doing that fascinated Shelmerdine, but the way she was doing it. In school, her movements were always abrupt and nervy. Now she seemed almost like a different person: lithe, graceful, each movement flowing into the next with an almost animal fluidity. She covered the distance between the lawn and the terraces in a sort of loping run and then leapt lightly from one terrace to the next until she was in position. Once there she took from her pocket something that looked like a miniature telescope and focussed it on the School. Prob-

ably on the window that she had been examining before.

Suddenly it occurred to Shelmerdine that this would be an ideal opportunity to search Cara's room. During the day it was difficult to get near VI form quarters without being seen and it was always possible that Cara would be there.

Within minutes Shelmerdine was back in the house. She then made her way straight to the VI form corridor and found Cara's room. Silently, she turned the handle and began slowly opening the door.

"Who's that?" called a voice from within. It was unmistakably Cara's voice. Shelmerdine shut the door and cleared the corridor in seconds. The door did not re-open behind her.

"Curiouser and curioser," thought Shelmerdine.

# SHELMERDINE BY MISS PRISCILLA LANGRIDGE

## CHAPTER VIII BLONDE GENIUS

WE have possibly given our readers the impression that the VI Form of Grancheſter consisted entirely of what might be termed "hearties", with the sole exception of Cara Leonie. If we have done so, the time has come to correct that impression. Certainly, to the late-twentieth-century eye, the general impression given by the Form would have been one of uprightness and cleanliness, and of a fresh-faced innocence of a sort which very few television-soaked five-year-olds of its own era could display. Freud was dead and God was very much alive, and the practical results of these two facts were written on the youthful lineaments of every child at Grancheſter, just as the results of their contraries were inscribed upon the countenance of every child at a comprehensive school of the latter twentieth century.

These things, however, are of a general nature. They affect every one, regardless of individual temperament or belief. Once the eye has become accustomed to the striking similarities which characterise any epoch, it settles down to discern the equally striking differences.

At Grancheſter in those days, there were two great divisions within the girls of the upper form, mirroring similar divisions in the Universities and elsewhere. First there were the "hearties", who, from a late-20th-century perspective all the girls may have superficially resembled. These were hard-working, hard-playing, sporty girls whose mottos were *mens sana in corpore sano* and "Play up, play up and play the game" and all that sort of thing. Quite unselfconsciously so; for the time when such ideas had been a deliberate, almost mannered, reaction against the Elizabethan ethos was already passing, and the nuance was lost on the young. Cleanliness and Godliness were being regarded with increasing seriousness by a generation which was acutely aware of dangers both to the body and to the soul.

In contradistinction to the "hearties" stood the "arties". The "arties" were born—like, as they themselves might have said, Aphrodite

from the foam—of the new wave of æstheticism which had broken upon the intellectual life of the era. Theirs were the cults of sensibility and of deliberate affectation. To be moved to tears by a humble flower, or to see in a child inexpressible depths of beauty and innocence of which others were oblivious because they went through life with their eyes closed to the celestial splendour that lay all about them: these were their aspirations; and if one had not the desired sensibility to the fullest degree, why, then one must dissemble it a little, for nothing could be duller than to be *natural*.

While the "hearties" were simple, the "arties" were complex. "Heartiness" was a straightforward rejection of the looseness, vice and anarchy of the Elizabethans. "Artiness", many suspected (we are speaking here more of the Universities and the grown-up world in general than of Granchester), was something of a back-door return to the slipperiness and self-indulgence of that age. It was easy to take that view, but quite erroneous. The new æstheticism was in many respects an even deeper rejection of Elizabethanism than the new "Puritanism". It rejected the cults of "spontaneity", "naturalness" and "sincerity" which had been so important to the last century. It rejected the utilitarianism and the belief in comfort and convenience; it rejected the overriding belief in work and in economics, in progress and in democracy, in the pursuit of a highly-refined sensibility which had existed among the finest souls of all times, but least of all in the 18th and 20th centuries.

Some æsthetes were mystics and some were metaphysicists; some were almost ascetic in their dedication only to the highest and most refined, and some were mere sensationalists; some were highly moral and some were decidedly amoral—but even the amoral ones were amoral in quite a different way from that of the late 20th century, and with a tone which was the very antithesis of the liberal, plebeian amoralism of that era.

The truth, of course, was that the two tendencies were complementary. No age speaks with a single voice. The deuterio-Elizabethans were both anarchic and regimented: both lascivious and Puritan; both idle and work-obsessed; both garish and drab. The "hearties", and the generally revivified spirit of the Bulldog Breed which affected the greater part of the nation in all classes, represented the antithesis of one side of the Elizabethan dichotomy, while the New æsthetes represented the antithesis of the other. At the same time, just as the two sides of the old "modernism"

were closely related, even when they opposed one another, so the new æsthetes and the new John Bulls, were joined by a common 21st-century *aisance*, and, indeed, the more advanced forms of each movement were perceived to have something in common, just as the most grimly Puritanical, grey-uniformed Maoist and the most self-indulgent, drug-sodden "hippie" were once seen both to represent the extreme *avant-garde* of the 20th century.

There was a further twist to the controversy in a school like Granchester, for many of the "arties" were also neo-feminists. "Feminism" in the 2020s was to mean something very different from what it had meant in the 1990s, and already the new ideas were abroad. It meant, in essence an adherence to "feminine values", a belief that women are quite different from men and cannot and must not be treated like them or behave like them. In its milder form, it held that masculine and feminine values are complementary; at its extreme edge it argued for the superiority of feminine values. Somewhere in the middle, it welcomed the new æstheticism as a return of feminine values to society as a whole; but in practical terms, and at Granchester, it meant that a minority of the VI Form regarded the dedication to vigorous sports and frank, rugged behaviour as a *passé* and unpleasant throwback to the Elizabethan cult of female masculinity. In consequence, this minority made a point of being as feminine and languorous as possible and of avoiding, as far as possible, every sort of physical exertion other than flower-gathering.

Altogether, it is a moot point which of the two types of Granchester VI-Former would have been most embarrassing to a Granchester VI-Former of the Elizabethan period; and it is a moot point which of the two would have found a VI-Former of the Elizabethan period most embarrassing.

The "hearties" we have met, if briefly. The "arties" must now be introduced. Jane Love was the leader of the "hearties" (though not the heartiest) and also head girl of the school, for the "hearties" were very much the Ruling Party at that time. The leader of the "arties" was a girl known as Esmeralda FitzWilliam. I say "known as" advisedly, for the school authorities denied her the appellative "Esmeralda", insisting upon the Anne with which she was christened, and even denied her, in official documents, the capital "W" in the middle of her surname. Esmeralda was a tall, willowy child who looked as though she had outgrown her bodily strength. She wore her hair in plaits, either wound about her head or hanging

looped beside her cheeks. She was not beautiful, or even pretty, but she had dark, haunting eyes which drew all one's attention away from her objective appearance and into her own, soulful *miroir*. She read poetry with genuine appreciation; the 19th-century Romantics and the new *Æsthetics*. She shone in English, was always in the top three in History, and was a complete failure at virtually everything else; partly through genuine lack of aptitude and partly through utter lack of application. She had raised the standards of the English class above those of any previous VI-Form, because her circle spent hours voluntarily discussing and reading aloud from great poems and novels for much of the time when they were not engaged in schoolwork. That was one of the things which the "hearties" most disliked about them. It was quite impossible for any ordinary, hard-working all-rounder to get a decent place in the English listtings.

Those who disliked Esmeralda found her exasperating, boring, and screech-makingly affected. Those who liked her found her fascinating almost beyond description: not only was she bewitching in and of herself, but she was constantly opening new worlds for her disciples: new literary adventures, new games, new appreciations of things they had seen without seeing a thousand times before. She was dangerous; no one could deny her that. She wanted her friends to live more fully, to achieve the best that they were capable of, to see and feel and speak and create. She had no great desire to be the single luminary of a passive and adoring circle, and although, to a great extent, that was what she was, she spared no pains in helping her followers up to her own level.

The "arties" were almost as prone to fads and crazes as the III Form. Sometimes, like those of the III Form, they came and went, lasting a few weeks or half a term. More often, each one took its permanent place in the panoply of Granchester *Æstheticism* and went thereafter through cycles or undulations of relative importance. One of these was the appreciation of the younger girls. The Revival of Childhood was one of the great features of the present era. For most people the child was a symbol of renewal; an opportunity to put right the corruption of the past by giving the new generation a real, decent childhood. To *Æsthetics* everywhere, the child was a deep well of innocence and mystery, polluted during the Elizabethan era, but always there in its other-worldly beauty and profundity. At Granchester this sensibility centred around the renewal of fagging. Curiously, fagging belonged

very much to the "hearty" outlook on life. The strengthening of hierarchy; the teaching of duty to younger girls and responsibility to older ones; the formation of character:—these were the guiding ideas behind it. To the aesthetes, while they accepted these things (for it would be quite wrong to think of them as possessing the Standardised 20th-century "rebel" mentality) fagging meant something else; something deeper. For one thing it gave one an opportunity to study the Child at close quarters; to appreciate her innocence and closeness to the Archetypal. For another, the relation of servitude was fascinating in itself. The children were mediæval pages, they were classical slave-girls, they were one's own children, bound in filial obedience and jealously protected from the Philistine school-at-large. And if, as they occasionally did, they understood the game themselves, they could join in a fascinating dance of the sensibilities, being at once nurtured and enslaved; made to laugh or cry at whim.

Many of the younger girls were a bit of a disappointment. They did not seem all that fascinatingly innocent (mostly because their mentors were too close to them both in age and era: an adult or a 20th-century child would have found them remarkably innocent). They were dull and matter-of-fact. They were preoccupied with tuck and with their own juvenile games.

"I don't see how *any one* could find depths of innocence in Molly Sudbury," confided Iffy Langham to Sarah Jones one day. "She is just a grubby, silly little urchin."

"Oh, but you have not looked deeply enough," replied Sarah.

Looking deeply could be an uphill struggle at times, but there were some juniors who really made the thing worthwhile; who entered fully into the spirit of the thing, having a natural true-childlikeness, or perhaps just a natural sense of theatre, or both. Esmeralda would welcome both, and would pounce upon my phrase "just a natural sense of theatre" with scorn. How boringly Elizabethan to disparage the thespian side of life. How positively archaic not to realise that many natural realities must be *acted* in order fully to be realised in this fallen world;—how outdated to cling to the naive old myths of sincerity and spontaneity. "If we seek to strip away the masks of the world, we only find other masks which are less charming. That is the lesson of the 20th century. The petals of a flower are but the mask upon the mechanics of nature; but the mask is the *point* of the thing. The mech-

chanics are only there to sustain the mask." This was a typical Esmeralda-ism; so you see that she was something of a prodigy, and also that she was well-versed in Troubridge, Carman and Clorasch.

Some girls, as I was saying, entered naturally into the rôle of mystical-child-cum-slave-girl, or whatever it may be; and of these, one excelled all others as the sun outshines the daytime moon. Her name was Lydia l'Ange. She was in the first form and small for her age; thus looking a true child. She had the most wonderful pale, spun-gold hair, which reached to her waist and beyond, so that when she joined her hands before her in demure submission (which she did often) she seemed to be surrounded by a shining mantle of white gold, which was at once a halo, a celestial robe and a radiant aura of light. Often, she spoke only a little English; carefully stumbling out her few words and turning upon her mistresses the dumb eloquence of her wonderful eyes. Her broken English, her charming gallicisms and her frequent difficulty in understanding her instructions added greatly to her charm.

Some of the above paragraph should be qualified a little. Her appearance was just as I have described it. In fact, my description can only begin to convey the quality of her appearance. Lydia l'Ange, though, was only sometimes her name. What vulgar people would insist upon calling her "real name" was Jane Marston. And she was not exactly French, though she had been studying the subject for three years, and knew enough of it to construct her broken-English sentences in a French-sounding fashion and she had once come fifth in the French class-list, though she was usually in the bottom half. English, on the other hand, she excelled at, doing almost as well as Esmeralda herself had at her age.

"But ah truly am forgetting ze English tongue when I am serving you, my honoured ones."

"Of course you are, my sweet one. It is all part of the magic." "The magic" was an important term in Esmeralda's vocabulary.

Lydia, of course, was Esmeralda's fag. She had originally belonged to Veronica Carlisle, who had terrified her, but Esmeralda had managed to come to an understanding with Veronica and arrange a "swap" for her own fag—a rather sluggish, desultory child whom Veronica saw as a challenge and soon made into a model fag. As a matter of fact, and contrary to many people's expectations, including yours, dear reader, Esmeralda and Veronica often came to understandings on things; for Veronica was by no means a thoroughgoing

"hearty"; she was a surprisingly subtle creature who appreciated aspects of both outlooks and had a neatly-shod foot in both camps.

Lydia liked to tell of her terror at the hands of Veronica, and of her rescue by Esmeralda. To her, Veronica was a wild Arab tribesman and Esmeralda a princess who had bought her. Sometimes Esmeralda toyed with the idea of selling her back, and she would implore on her knees with real tears:—"Whip me, mistress, whip me until my ivory shoulders are covered in purple stripes, and I shall but love thee the more; but I beg of thee, do not sell me back." And it seemed unlikely that she would ever do so; for every one of sensibility knew that there were in the æsthetic party two members of true genius: one was Esmeralda and the other was the first-form child Lydia l'Ange. Lydia's genius was less of the mind than of the sensibility. "Animal genius," one of Esmeralda's adherents had called it (the phrase is from Carman's *Rediscovery of the World* and is much more complimentary than it sounds). "Blonde genius," said another, quoting from *Angels in Babylon*. But genius it certainly was, as the world was later to discover, when Lydia l'Ange (not Jane Marston) became a household name. But that is quite another story. For the present, Lydia l'Ange was Esmeralda's bond-slave and thus court slave, pet and protégée to the Granchester æsthetic Party.

I have referred to the æsthetics as a Party, and I have spoken with literal truth, for party politics were a piece of Granchester tradition. From time out of mind there had always been two parties in the school: the Blues and the Greens,—formed, of course, upon the ancient Roman model. Possibly it had begun as a novel way of dividing the school and stimulating loyalties in the earliest days, when it was too small to have a full-scale house-system. Houses had later been introduced, but somehow the Greens and the Blues lived on. As they were unofficial, girls were not assigned a Party, but joined one at will; or rather, since the parties were always somewhat exclusive, supported one at will, and hoped eventually to be invited to join. When the houses were first introduced, the Parties were supposed to be abolished, and for a time the abolition was ineffectively enforced; but before long it became a Tradition, in days when Tradition in schools was sacred, and when girls' schools craved Traditions to make them more like the older boys' schools.

Sometimes the Parties had meant little if anything. They were just something to shout for at the annual Party Tennis Tournament and

an excuse for playing the odd jape on members of the opposing Party. At other times some real contention of principle had existed between the Parties, with more or less seriousness. Often, the blues had been associated with Conservative politics and the more traditional element in school life. During the late Elizabethan period, there had actually been a short-lived political movement called "the Greens", and because its ideas had been popular among many young people, the Granchester Greens had vaguely aligned themselves with them. Today, the Blues were the "hearties" and the Greens were the "arties". Esmeralda had wanted to change the party colour to violet, which was recognised as the colour of the new *Aesthetics* (just as yellow had been the colour of the late-Victorian *Aesthetics*); but tradition had been too strong for her, and many of the lower forms found it amusing to corrupt Esmeralda's name to "Emerald" in token of her Party.

There were no Party elections in the school—no elections, indeed, of any sort except for a brief period in the 1960s when the prefects and Head Girl had been elected—but there were a number of ways in which each Party tried to establish its supremacy over the other; having the Head Girl, Games Captain or a majority of prefects in one's Party was one way—and the Blues had all of these. This did not count for much with the current Green leadership, who were disdainful of games and, on the whole, were not competing for prefectships, which they considered "too energetic" ("energy"—a dated Elizabethan vogue-word—had for *aesthetics* something of the connotation which "enthusiasm" had for the 18th century). Winning the Party Tennis Tournament was another, as was winning the newer, and therefore less prestigious, Party Fencing Tournament. The Greens did have some useful tennis players and tennis was the one game most of them liked, as being civilised and not "teamy". On fencing they were divided. Some considered female fencing Elizabethan, some thought the art elegant. Most *aesthetics* fenced in winter, if only to keep themselves off muddy pitches and out of what Esmeralda called "brawls over balls". They were in with a chance on the fencing. Democratic support was again a Blue monopoly. Esmeralda had a following at every level of the school, but it could never compete with the combined prestige of games, prefects, the Head Girl and the simpler appeal of John Bullism. But again, democratic support was something the present Greens disdained. There was one

criterion of Party victory which both sides respected completely. Possession of the Mascots.

The Mascots dated back to the earliest phase of the school's history, to the second or third generation of its age when one of the first "old girls" had presented to her Party, the Blues, a bronze statuette of an Amazon spear-thrower which instantly became the sign and talisman of the Party. The Greens felt themselves discomfited, and the first act of the Head Girl (then a Green, and an heiress in a small way) upon leaving school was to procure an even finer bronze of an Amazon charioteer and present it to her own Party. This charioteer was unquestionably the more splendid of the talismans, although the spear-thrower was the more venerable, and the Blues, feeling themselves trumped, set in motion a successful dormitory raid to steal the charioteer. Within a short time the Greens contrived not only to restore their Mascot, but to capture the spear-thrower, and thus began the series of raids, counter-raids, subtle thefts and cunning hiding-places which constituted the continual strife between the Parties. At times each party had its own Mascot, at times each Party had the other's, but when one Party held both Mascots, it could not but be acknowledged the victor, and it was in this happy position that the Greens now found themselves.

The position was not of Esmeralda's making. She had inherited it, and it was vitally necessary that she should maintain it. Her method of concealing the charioteer was simple, and, as it seemed to her, consummately appropriate. She had given it into the charge of Lydia l'Ange, for Lydia herself was regarded by the present Greens as their true Mascot. The first-former used no great art in the concealment of the treasure over which she was made custodian. She simply kept it in her locker. This, however, was a very adequate defence, for the school lockers were well-constructed and fitted with strong and sophisticated locks, dating from the late 20th century when such precautions had been a necessity. Lydia kept the key to her locker on a cord about her neck which she wore underneath her clothes both day and night. If anything, her method might have been criticised as being a little too secure—a shade unsporting, perhaps, for there seemed to be no means by which the Blues could have a chance of capturing the prize, even if they had known where to look for it, short of a degree of violence to person or property which was quite unknown at Granchester. This consideration, however, did not trouble Lydia l'Ange unduly. The slave-girl

had been promised the most salutary of punishments should she fail of her charge, and there was considerable doubt in her mind as to what might really happen if such a circumstance should ever arise. It was unlike Esmeralda to let her words fall idly or to let her magic operate at the level of mere pretence. Indeed, Lydia would have been deeply dis-

appointed had she done so; at the same time she had no wish to put the matter to the test.

It was thus with a thrill of terror that she opened the locker one morning to find that the charioteer was not there. Nothing else had been disturbed; the door had been locked as usual and the key was about her neck as ever —but the charioteer was quite definitely gone.

al French-Canadian Song; and (lastly) Sonnet 18 by William Shakespeare.

"And in Admiration of your excellent Magazine, I remain, dear Lady,

"YR. OBDT. SVT.", [signed] MR. C.D. KING

And that, dear children, is the secret of the Oise Poets—I mean, poets.

## SHELMERDINE BY PRISCILLA LANGRIDGE CHAPTER IX

### THE ADVENTURE OF THE MISSING MASCOT

To say that Esmeralda's wrath was terrible would really be to spin a yarn. To her the whole thing was little more than a game. The other Greens were much upset and Esmeralda realised that it was something of a setback; but the trembling of her slave-girl was worth more to her than the rather charming Mascot which had to be kept in a locked vault like a miser's hoard because of the silly customs of the school. It was the perfect pose and Lydia acted it perfectly. It was an aspect of her *miroir* which it would have been a pity to leave unexplored.

In her distress, Lydia repaired to Mimsy Crystal. Mimosa Crystal (that really was her name, lucky thing!) was, after Lydia herself, the nearest thing to an "arty" that the First Form could boast. She was vague, bookish, distinctly unsporty and quite whimsical. She was able to join Lydia in her flights of fancy and did not mind (as many of the Form rather did) that she spent so much of her time with members of the Sixth. Mimsy's sense of schoolgirl propriety, like Lydia's, was not highly developed. Had Lydia not spent so much of her time among the aesthetes, she and Mimsy might well have been best friends. As it was, Mimsy admired Lydia from more or less afar; enraptured by her wonderful hair and her wonderful mannerisms; her half-adoption into a higher sphere increasing the air of angelic remoteness and delicacy which always surrounded her.

It was thus something of a rapture for Mimsy Crystal when Lydia came to her for help. That Mimsy was a great reader of Sherlock Holmes was well known, and it was upon this that Lydia based her appeal when Mimsy, having read her cryptically-worded note, met her in a secluded corner of the school grounds.

"Forgive my being so mysterious, Miss Crystal, but I understand that you are a consulting detective."

"I think I may claim some modest success in that sphere of endeavour, Miss l'Ange."

"Then I have a case to lay before you. Perhaps the most mysterious that you have ever encountered," and she proceeded to set before Mimsy the facts, relating to the Adventure of the Missing Mascot.

"You will forgive the suggestion, Miss l'Ange, but is it impossible that you left the door unlocked?"

"Oh, that is what those beastly Sixthers are saying; but I did not—I know I did not. I am always so very careful, and I distinctly remember doing it."

"Does the Emerald Princess believe you?"

"Of course she believes me. She always believes me. But that does not alter the case. She said I was to be whipped if the charioteer was lost, and the charioteer is lost, and I shall be whipped; whipped before the court assembled."

"Well, I don't know what she *will* do, but she cannot *really* whip you, you know," said Mimsy reassuringly.

Such reassurance was not welcome. Poor Lydia was genuinely terrified, but she certainly did not want the magic of her drama to be in any way reduced. Of course she must be whipped; the world would lose its brightness if it was all a pretence.

"She will bring my former master to whip me—the chieftan Veronica. She is a prefect, you know. She is allowed to cane junior girls."

"Yes, but they hardly ever do it——"

This was quite the wrong thing to say. The very suggestion that Lydia was not an exception was horrid. In any case, it was not true. There was no doubt that Veronica would happily play her appointed rôle in this drama. Even though she was not a permanent member of the court, she was entered into this aspect of the magic as deeply as any one except Esmeralda and Lydia themselves.

"Oh, you do not understand. She has whipped me on many occasions. Shall I show you the marks?" Lydia put her hand to her shoulder, as if to rend her school blouse, beginning at the same time to sob pitifully.

"No, no, that is unnecessary," said Mimsy much to Lydia's relief, for this part of the story was quite untrue. "Poor child," she said, taking her hands. "You have been cruelly used."

"Oh, I do not mind," said Lydia, in a voice tremulous with tears; "pray do not think that mind. It is just that I cannot bear the thought

of suffering disgrace and ignominy for something which I did not do. Please say that you will help me."

"My powers, such as they are, are at your service, dear lady."

\* \* \*

The project of confining Shelmerdine to Coventry was not a notable success. The way in which the fascinating new stranger had been monopolised from the beginning by the Inner Circle had always been half-resented in some quarters and once ostracised, Shelmerdine had blatantly wooed and easily won the company of another group of madcaps, led by one Binkie Parr. Her tactics had been a mixture of dash and scorn—the attraction of her swashbuckling *miroir* combined with an implied atmosphere of "I say, you are not really going to take this schoolgirl Coventry business seriously, are you?" Within a few minutes Binkie had accepted a dare from Shelmerdine and was saying to her circle:

"You chaps can do what you like, but I am not cutting a girl for standing up for her friends just because the Fielding family say so. They don't own this Form, even if they think they do."

Quite why Shelmerdine exerted herself to win Binkie over is hard to say. She did not much like the girl, and liked her cronies less. She had rather thought of absconding from the school altogether now that it had become boring; but she wanted to demonstrate to Dot that she could not defeat her; that she could break Coventry and give her talents to a rival company. In this latter she was highly successful, and the dares of the Binkie Set under Shelmerdine's direction outshone the exploits of the now rather dimmed and disconcerted Inner Circle. To some extent it was a blow beneath the belt, for the twins were in such deep disgrace with the school authorities that they were not in a position to exercise the utmost daring. The form was radically split; some staying loyal to the Inner Circle and the Coventry rule and others openly regarding Shelmerdine and Binkie as having supplanted the twins as unofficial leaders of the form.

It would be grossly unfair to say that the Binkie Set were Bad Company—there was very little of that at Granchester—but they were not of the same quality as the twins and Alix. Their standards were not so high and they lacked—it was hard to put one's finger upon it—a certain brightness, a certain subtlety, a certain warmth. It made one realise just how fine, in many respects, the Inner Circle was; for these girls—perfectly accept-

able friends—seemed in comparison just a touch coarse-grained. Shelmerdine felt the difference as a slight hollowness at the centre of things, but she smiled and ignored it; though she noticed how often she found herself looking forward to her study sessions with Flavia.

"What we need," she said to Binkie one day, "is a really topping dare. One that will set those types by the ears."

"I can think of one," said Binkie, "Only it can't be done."

"Never say that, old humming-top. Why, when I was your age—"

"No, but this one really can't."

"You are only saying that to whet my appetite. What is it?"

"Bagging the Greens' chariot."

"Yes, I see what you mean, no one knows where it is."

"Oh, I know where it is, alright. The problem is getting it."

"How do you know where it is?"

"I know a girl who knows a girl who's seen it. I realise that sounds a bit rumoury, but I am pretty sure my information is correct. It's in a first-form girl's locker. A child called Jane Marston. You must have seen her about: she's that infant with the extraordinary blonde hair she can sit on; the one who moves about as if she were made of porcelain."

"Yes, I've seen her. 'Normously' striking child. But how could a first-former come to have the chariot?"

"Well she's Esmeralda's fag and a sort of pet of the 'arties'."

"How very delicate. I did not realise the Sixth contained such refined taste."

"Refined rot."

"When you are my age, child, you will have more appreciation for the subtler things of life."

"I jolly well won't."

"No, I do not suppose you will, come to think of it. So you want me to lift the chariot?"

"I really don't think it can be done. Those lockers are well built. Each lock is unique and they are pretty much unpickable. I know—I am quite a hand and I've tried it."

"I never pick locks. Is there a master key?"

"I don't think there can be, because Edna Pinkerton lost her key once and the handyman had to break her locker open. It took him a whole morning. They are always rotting on at us not to lose the keys."

"I see. Well it certainly does seem impossible. I could never do it unless I was dared."

"You mean you could do it if you were

dared?"

"Dare me and see."

\* \* \*

Detaching Lydia's key and replacing it afterwards was one of the more challenging dips Shelmerdine had undertaken, but it was easily within her power. The dare had been issued at breakfast and by the afternoon break Shelmerdine was able to display the chariot in a secret place known to the Binkie Set.

"I say," said Betty Norton. "We really have pulled something off this time!"

"What will we do with it?" asked Kate Lowell.

"I think we'd better give it to the Blues," said Binkie. "If we keep it it would be rather like Stealing, but if we bag it for the Blues it's sport."

"I want to keep it for a few days," said Shelmerdine firmly. "After that, we shall see."

The idea of "bagging it for the Blues" was quite uncontentious among the Binkie set. For one thing, it would make the exploit public and bragable. Mascot-bagging was a school tradition, not a crime. For another thing, the Third was almost solidly Blue. The ideas which animated the Parties in the higher forms were not hotly debated, but it was generally felt that the Blues were more "square" and sporting. Shelmerdine's own loyalties were more divided. When she had first arrived she would have been solidly Green, preferring subtlety and individualism to the "team spirit". At that time she would undoubtedly have miss-read the Greens by an Elizabethan light, but her instinct would have been for them. Later, she vaguely backed the blues, because, well, she thought their attitudes rather fun and considered what she had heard of the Greens a bit drippy. Now she was less sure. Blue bounciness as epitomised by the Binkie Set could become a touch tiring, and the little Binkie had said about Lydia intrigued her. She had often noticed the girl—in fact, Lydia was probably the only first-former Shelmerdine had noticed as an individual—and she had always felt strangely drawn to her; not merely because she was so striking and so interestingly affected, but because, as most sensitive people noticed, there was something very unusual and valuable about her—something magical and of the highest quality: art, animal genius, call it what one might. Like Oscar Wilde, she put her genius into her life, and it showed even at that tender age. That Esmeralda had adopted her as a "pet"—and had induced her whole set to do likewise—in-

creased her respect for Esmeralda. Here, surely, was something delicate and subtle, and she had felt half-ashamed from the beginning of intruding upon such hallowed ground with a bouncy Blue rag. She was somewhat inclined to return the charioteer quietly, by the same means that she had taken it; but then came temptation in the form of the notice.

The notice appeared on the School notice-board. It read:

*DEAR CHAPS,*

*What clever fellows you are. One cannot leave a door unlocked for an hour without your getting in. Would you care to go for double or quits? I am the keeper of the spear-thrower and am authorised to hazard her upon the draw of a card. If you dare, pray approach:*

*MIMSY CRYSTAL*

"And who is Mimsy Crystal?" asked Shelmerdine.

"Another first-former—cheeky Chinaman. But it's a trap, of course."

"I don't see why 'of course'."

"It's like the Silver Arrow, don't you see? They know Robin Hood will not be able to resist the challenge, and when he comes, they nab him. The first-former is just a front—even if she is the keeper of the spear-thrower, all the Green Sixthers will be lying in ambush."

"Nonsense, they're gentlemen."

"The Greens have all sorts of funny ideas. They aren't sportsmen: besides the same rules don't apply in the Mascot War. Chaps do things which would be called Stealing or cheating if they were done for other reasons."

"But just think what a *coup* it would be to have both Mascots."

"Take my advice, Shelmerdine, old po-go-stick; steer clear."

"Robin Hood didn't."

The idea of getting both Mascots appealed greatly to Shelmerdine. Both Mascots! Anything the Fieldings did would look pale after that! She was, however, well aware of the likelihood of a trap, and had no intention of complying with the instructions on the notice. Not, at any rate, until she had tried something else. The wording of the notice implied that the Greens thought the locker had been left open. Very natural. How else could it have been done? In that case, there was a chance that the spear-thrower might be in Mimsy Crystal's locker. It was a simple matter to lift Mimsy's key. It was merely in an inside pocket. Shelmerdine was extremely careful about opening the locker. It was just possible that

her opponents were subtler than they seemed and that it was watched; but no, ten minutes observation was enough to be certain that here was no watch. She opened the locker and, sure enough, there was the spear-thrower, resplendent in mellow, greening bronze, just waiting to be bagged. Somehow, she felt extra-cautious about this show, and rather than walk off with the thing in her possession, she simply transferred it to her own locker and locked it up. Her heart was beating rapidly. The whole thing had had the *feel* of a trap. Still, she had certainly not been observed, no one could look into her locker and she need not retrieve the statue for a week or more if she chose not to.

As few moments after she had reached the third-form common room, the bomb dropped. Veronica Carlisle entered, accompanied by Mimsy Crystal.

"Nobody move," said Veronica with quiet drama. Nobody did. "A few minutes ago, some one took a statuette from Mimoso's locker. That statue was coated with an indelible green dye. The Form will line up along that wall and present their hands."

"No need for that," said Shelmerdine quietly. "It's a fair cop."

"Show me your hands."

Shelmerdine turned out her green-blotched palms. "I arrest you in the name of the Emerald Princess. Follow me."

"Rum go," whispered Binkie.

"Emerald Princess!" whispered Kate. "What do you think they're up to?"

Shelmerdine was conducted into the Green Common Room; the traditional counsel chamber of the Greens. Esmeralda sat enthroned upon an armchair. Lydia l'Ange knelt at her feet like an angelic porcelain statue surrounded with golden hair. A tall sixth-former stood at either side, like a guard of honour. They should have had robes, of course, and knew they should, but they carried it off very well in the dove-grey school uniform ("How *merciful* that it is not navy," as Esmeralda had often said) and found that it even added a certain *piquancy* of its own.

"Kneel before the princess," commanded Veronica. Shelmerdine obeyed.

Esmeralda looked at Shelmerdine for some minutes before she spoke. "Interesting child," she said at length, and then, as if it were a tedious duty of State, to which she was long accustomed: "You are charged with abstracting royal treasures from their places of safe-keeping. How do you plead?"

"Guilty, your Highness," said Shelmerdine. This went well with the court. She had

entered the magic.

"Do you realise that my slave here was nearly whipped for your misdemeanours?"

"Then I confess myself glad to have been apprehended, your Highness."

"A noble spirit. Pray tell the court, how did you effect your crimes?"

"By sorcery, your highness."

"By sorcery?"

"Yes, your Highness. I have a power over locks and all manner of bonds."

"Would you care to demonstrate this power?"

"I fear that is impossible, your Highness. You see, my sorceries work only when I am free. Apprehend me, imprison me and all my strength is gone."

"Do I detect some subtle ploy wherewith you would gain your freedom? Alas, it is not to be. I shall listen no longer to your artful words. You shall be whipped, Lydia."

Upon this mention of her name, Lydia rose with unspeakable grace and walked, marionettish, to a table covered by a violet cloth. She lifted the cloth and beneath it lay a school cane, long and slender, Shelmerdine, from her kneeling position, did not see it until Lydia lifted it in her hands. She had never seen one before; it seemed an almost mythical thing. Lydia bore it to Veronica, knelt before her and offered it up to her. Shelmerdine felt a tightness in her chest and a tingling over her forehead—and yet everything Lydia did was so beautiful. Esmeralda had brought out her genius consummately. Veronica smiled. Two sixth-formers assisted Shelmerdine to her feet and led her to the table. She remembered briefly that she was really the same age as they, perhaps older. It seemed a whimsical thought. They bent her down, her body flat on the table, her feet on the ground. Her tight skirt stretched taut. Veronica flexed the long cane in her hands. She had wanted to do this for a long time.

"Six strokes," said the Princess. The first stroke hurt more than anything Shelmerdine could remember. Veronica laid them on slowly and skilfully, with the force of real intention. At the last one Shelmerdine had to use all her will not to cry out. She was raised to the standing position and brought before the Princess, her face unnaturally flushed. The Princess smiled sweetly.

"A most charming ceremony," she said.

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"It was a charming ceremony, was it not?" said Lydia l'Ange.

"Were you not sorry for her?" asked Mim-

sy Crystal.

"Oh, no. Not at all. I loved it. I can be quite cruel, you know. But I still cannot understand how you did it."

"It was a risk, really, and quite a bit of guesswork, but the Princess agreed to take the risk. It was clear that some one had an unnaturally clever way with locks or some such thing, and from certain rumours—one about the Hope-Carrington Cup in particular—I rather suspected that that some one was in the Third. Quite how she worked I could not tell—and still cannot—but the only way to catch her was to lay a trap; one which was in almost every respect perfectly genuine. Had the culprit accepted the gamble, we should have played it honestly; the Emerald Princess would have it no other way. The spear-thrower was given into my keeping and everything was done just as it should have been. You see, we had no idea of the powers of this mistress-thief except that they were exceptional. Any hint of a trap might have been fatal. So every aspect of the game was entirely pukkah—except, of course, the green dye, which was just a precaution in case our mistress-thief should not be entirely honest, as mistress-theives, I believe, occasionally are: not. The locker was watched at crowded times of course, but not at other times, for fear of frightening our bird away—but we had several keys made for the locker—which cannot be reached without passing the Green common room, and a Green Sixther contrived to check it as soon as the coast was clear every time any one passed down the corridor. As soon as it was found missing there was a raid on the Third."

"And the indelible green dye—where on earth did you get that?"

"Oh, that was my own touch of drama—you must permit me my own touch of drama. It was green chalk-dust really."

"Your own touch of drama! I should say so! Why, the theatre lost a master-spirit when you decided to devote your talents to criminology."

"My blushes, dear lady, my blushes."

# SHELMERDINE

BY MISS PRISCILLA LANGRIDGE

## CHAPTER X

### THE OPEN ROAD

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IT WAS THE TIME OF DAY when Shelmerdine was often mysteriously unaccountable-for. Usually she was in Flavia's little room improving her mind (and her mind really was very much improved). Today she was at the railway station.

You will be forgiven, dear reader, if you assume that her departure from Granchester was a direct consequence of her adventure at the court of the Emerald Princess, and indeed you will not be wrong; however, the exact nature of the connexion between the two events may not be precisely what you had expected.

Of resentment or anger relating to her recent chastisement, there was not a trace in Shelmerdine's breast. On the contrary, she felt that the entire incident had momentarily raised school life to a higher plane. She had seemed to breathe a rarer air and to feel the exhilaration of life as she desired to live it: rich, dramatic and whimsical. Pain, like danger, was a thing she did not mind in reasonable amounts provided it helped her to live to the full. However, in the aftermath of her arrest and punishment she began to find Granchester life painfully dull. The fatuity of the Binkie set began to grate on her, and deprived of the real friendship of the Inner Circle, she began to find the School's attractions distinctly evanescent.

She had always promised herself that if the School became a bore she would take her leave of it without warning. It had been becoming a bore for some little time now, but somehow she had felt an attachment which disinclined her strongly to leave—almost as if she had really been a Granchester schoolgirl; almost as if she had found something akin to a real rootedness. But now the spell was broken. She had breathed for a precious half-hour the air of intoxication and she could not go back into the dreariness of a twinless Third Form life.

At the station, Shelmerdine received one of the greatest shocks of her young life: a shock all the more forceful because it came not from without but from within. Her first business, of course, must be to obtain funds for her ticket to—wherever she might let fate direct her. She spotted almost immediately a youngish,

well-heeled looking lady who seemed to be the perfect pigeon. The pigeon carried a soft maroon leather bag with a folded-over closure fastened by a small gold clasp. For Shelmerdine's swift and sensitive fingers it was simplicity itself silently to undo the clasp and find their way to a fine purse in matching maroon leather with the initials C.J. stamped in gold. It was the initials that did it. What did they stand for? Christina? Claire? How long had she owned the purse and matching bag? Did she love them? Were they a present from her departed mother? Her dear husband? Had she had them since she first left home (they did not look new, although they were so well-made that they had worn very well). Would she cry when she found the purse gone? Could she really afford the money?

It was absurd. A simple theft of a few pounds. It happened all the time. Not as much now, perhaps, as in her day, but even now it could hardly be uncommon. It never has been. In all probability she would hardly miss it, and what if she did?

"Excuse me, miss, did you drop this?"

Shelmerdine heard her own voice with a sort of incredulity—confident and self-possessed as ever, but with the self-possession of a well-bred English school-girl rather than the old Bingham girl-about-town swagger. It was rather charming—perhaps all the more charming for the fact that Shelmerdine, for once in her life, was entirely unconscious of her own charm.

"Why, thank you, dear." The lady looked intently through her gold-rimmed spectacles and then opened the purse. "Please accept this for your kindness."

"No, really, I couldn't—"

"Don't be a silly;—of course you must."

Shelmerdine looked at the bright, new-minted, half-crown in her palm with bewilderment. It was enough to pay her fare to quite a number of places, though if she had really lost the will to steal, she might need it for subsistence. She was not unduly worried. She still had complete confidence in her ability to play her way out of any difficulty. Nonetheless, she was unused to having to contend with so tenuous and intimate a difficulty as a conscience.

At the ticket-office stood a man of middle years, dressed in a yellow check suit with a lavender waistcoat. He had a coarse air about him and Shelmerdine noticed that one of his ear-lobes shewed the mark of a long-healed piercing. Obviously he had been a dreadful type in the late 20th or early 21st century, and now—well he seemed to be a dreadful type of quite another sort. Shelmerdine found herself rather fascinated by the changes that time and fashion might wreak upon such a character.

As she came closer she became aware that a somewhat heated discussion was in progress.

"Whaddaya mean I can't have a first class ticket. I can pay. Here's my money! You take it and—"

"Come on, mate," replied the man in the ticket office. "You know it ain't just a question of money. I don't make the rules, do I?"

"No, you don't make the rules but you make assumptions, don't you? You look at me and make assumptions."

"That's what I'm paid for. Now come on, I've got to do me job, ain't I?"

"I say, do hurry up with the tickets, Daddy. We shall miss the train."

The last voice was confident and patrician and its owner wore the familiar grey uniform of Granchesfer School. It was more than a local railway functionary's job was worth to offend Granchesfer, and in any case, he had obviously been somewhat mistaken about the exact social position of this rather unprepossessing passenger.

"Of course you're right, sir. Awful sorry. Two first class, was it?"

"Uh, yes. That's right."

The two passengers hurried toward the train just before it left the station. Shelmerdine noticed the smartly-uniformed guards, the red and green flags, the shrill, authoritative peeps of whistles, the shining, dark-green liveried carriages, each door emblazoned with a golden wheel surmounted by a lion and the initials I.R. Her "father" opened a carriage door and ushered her in.

Shelmerdine extended her hand. "May I take my ticket, please."

He considered her. The train pulled smoothly away. "You're a cool customer, aren't you now?"

"Yes, I suppose I am." She continued to hold out her hand.

"Running away from school, are we?"

"I doubt if you are."

"But you are, aren't you?"

His manner fascinated her. He was insolent, but his insolence was a very different thing from what it would have been in his earring-days. What was the difference? For one thing there was an intangible sense of her position. He found her attractive, yet there was no question but that there was an absolute and insuperable barrier set between them, and one which had nothing to do with age. And then there was an equally intangible but equally powerful sense of his own position. While there was in one way less swagger and challenge in his manner than there would have been, there was also a genuine confidence and

self-respect which no one of his type—or, indeed, of almost any type—had possessed in the later 20th century. The ostentatious and entirely imitative “rebellion” of those times had covered (and in fact been part of) a profound self-contempt, which was expressed in clothes, manners and facial expressions. These people had been puppets of an electronic plutocracy. Their very truculence and ugliness was simply part of the script. Today, subtly but quite absolutely, they had changed. They were their own men. More “conformist” in a certain, obvious, way (the scripted “rebellion” was no longer being acted out), and yet more wholly themselves, more genuinely independent, more *centred* in themselves.

“If it was any of your business, I might tell you.”

“Well, perhaps it is my business. I mean, here I am, aiding and abetting you. Perhaps I should be failing in my duty if I wasn’t to report the matter.”

‘Failing in my duty,’ mused Shelmerdine. What an interesting turn of phrase. Of course, this fellow wasn’t much interested in duty, but one could somehow tell by the way he spoke of it that the concept was in the air. There was a formality about his choice of words that would have seemed quite unnatural when they were both her age, even in one of his age. He recognised himself to be her inferior in a way that would have been impossible before, but at the same time he possessed an inalienable *authority* of his own which could never have existed before. In short, their positions were subtle and complex, whereas before they would have been two powerless “consumers”, equal to each other because equally abject before the Machine. That, of course, was what the doctrine of equality meant and had always meant.

The *mana* of civilisation had been taken back from the electronic plutocracy and re-distributed among the population. Distributed very unequally, of course, else it could not have happened at all—would merely have created a power vacuum; or rather have been another pretence concealing the true power vortex—yet distributed it was, and there lived none so humble as not to share some part in it. This fellow was far from being a gentleman, or even a *bourgeois*. A mildly prosperous ageing spiv was a fair description, yet he had a certain *dignity*, and that dignity had nothing to do with his money either. It was something he possessed despite being a spiv rather than because of it. Something he possessed simply from being a British subject in good standing—something which, much as the word might be out of favour in many quarters, could only be called the fruit of genuine democracy, as opposed to the *ersatz* variety which had bruted the name so brashly in his younger days.

“Well, miss?”

Shelmerdine smiled. The whole thing was quite intriguing. The ‘miss’ was by no means ironical or disrespectful. It had, perhaps, something of that mixture of deference and authority with which a policeman might use it—but a policeman who knew his place. His whole manner had changed so utterly from what it must have been two decades ago. Was he aware of it? No more aware, presumably, than the real people of the 1950s who had been subtly but completely transmogrified into the deracinated creatures of the 1970s.

“I will trouble you for my ticket. We have struck a bargain to which you implicitly agreed by buying it in the first place. Your benefit is entry into a first-class compartment, mine is the ticket. If you play fair, our association is now at an end. If you play dirty, I shall regard it as a challenge, and you will swiftly find that I am far better at it than you.”

“What would you do then?” asked the man, half-challenging, half-intrigued.

“Well, I should begin by pulling the communication cord. After that, you would find me remarkably inventive and utterly convincing. That is a possibility, though there are more ways than one to skin a cat.”

He smiled quite good-naturedly and put his hand into his breast pocket. “You win, then——” suddenly he turned white. “Sing a swoggin’ song! It’s gorn!”

“Oh, come now,” said Shelmerdine, “you don’t expect me to believe that.”

“On the Bible, miss. It’s gorn. Mine too. And all my cash.”

“A lot of people wouldn’t believe you,” said Shelmerdine, “but somehow I do.” She took his notecase from her own pocket and extracted her ticket. “There you are, my good man. Be more careful with it in future. And remember that here are more ways than one to skin a cat.”

She sauntered into an empty first-class compartment and arranged herself neatly by a window with a copy of *New Film Weekly* which she had bought at the station. She had seen several films during her stay at Granchester and was beginning to take an interest in them—she especially liked the dark-eyed, innocent Miss Claudine Gallimard, who played such strange and lyrical rôles of haunting, other-worldly innocence and fatal, unselfconscious charm.

Yet she kept thinking of that fellow. People had changed so subtly and so absolutely. Otherwise they would laugh at Miss Gallimard. How had that hard, false cynicism fallen away so quickly? How had Hanoverians become Victorians? Had *she* changed?

She had never felt much in common with the late 20th century in any case. Perhaps she should always have liked Miss Gallimard. She had always been much subtler than her contemporaries. But—but she *had* changed, had she not? Look at the way she was sitting now, so upright, so contained. Even when she had spoken to that fellow—yes, there was something of her old girl-of-the-worldliness there, but still she was very much the Young Lady. It was hard to refuse a true rôle when some one gave it to you. And the way she had spoken to the young woman on the station. That was hardly Shelmerdine at all. Or was it the new Shelmerdine? Where, in any case, does the personality end and the mask begin? Is there really a distinction at all?

Suddenly another thought arose before her. The man's notecase. She had returned it to him—without even thinking about it. If she could not rob a little lad like him, then who *could* she rob? What exactly *was* she going to do for money?

She settled back comfortably in her seat. Well, it was a challenge, and she was sure she would prove equal to it.

The train pulled up at a station called Bellbridge. Shelmerdine had half-promised herself that she would alight at the first station that began with one of her initials, provided it seemed pleasant, and Bellbridge seemed as good a place to alight as any. She did not wish to go to a big city. She wished to see something of the New England as it was in its heartland.

As she left the charmingly-kept station with its neat garden and hanging baskets of flowers, she found herself on a country road, perhaps fifty yards from the first houses of the little town. The road ran over a small hump-bridge. Instead of going directly into the town she left the road by the bridge and went a little way down a grassy path among the trees and tangled undergrowth. There, under cover of the foliage, she removed her grey school blazer, with its Granchester badge and her school hat. Both of them she hung on a short projecting branch which rather conveniently resembled a coat-rack. The weather was warm, and it was quite pleasant to be without them. In any case, she felt it might be prudent not to broadcast the school she had deserted. She had only the vaguest plans as to where and how she was to sleep for the night. It was probably pleasant enough to sleep out of doors, but she had no intention of doing so. "Roughing it" was hardly the Bingham manner.

Shelmerdine sauntered into town cloaked in a general sense of the pleasantness of the world. The streets were almost as well-kept as the station had

been. Every one was dressed neatly and becomingly—children in neat little coats; women in white gloves and trim hats. Somehow, everything seemed so homely and delightful. Doubtless this place had its sins and sorrows, as all places must; but the ugly anarchy, the coarse, loose nastiness of her own time which had smirched and dirtied everything; this was something of which the children could not conceive and the adults only half-remembered.

She began to feel hungry. She had eaten very little at school. She noticed a small tea-shop—really more like a private house with tables set out in the front parlour and a sign saying "*Teas*". It seemed still to be open, so she pushed the door and set the bell clanging. She was immediately attended by a girl rather younger than herself, shy and rather pretty.

"You're just in time," she said. "We were about to close up."

She was well-spoken—not at all like the usual hired girl. Shelmerdine found herself liking her enormously. Something of her old reserve had gone and she felt a warmth and open-heartedness which was at once strange and delightful.

"If it is any trouble—" she began, half-turning to go.

"Of course not! You are very welcome. Sit down here and I'll get you a menu."

The charming, light-hearted strains of 'Little Susan Sunbeam', the latest popular song, scented the air from a very quiet wireless-set in the corner. Shelmerdine perused the menu, finding that she could have whatever she desired and still have ample change from her half-crown. Some sandwiches, perhaps, followed by meringues. Or what about toast? It was rather hot weather, but toast seemed so—

"Dorothy!" A jarring voice broke the spell. Not a pleasant voice, but interesting nonetheless. It was a voice much less educated than that of the shop-girl's, but straining after an educated pronunciation. Rather common but quite affected. Shelmerdine reflected how few voices of this kind one had heard in her own day. The lower orders really had nothing to strive after. She quite warmed to this rather harsh voice.

"Dorothy, when you've *quite* finished, perhaps you'll be good enough to give me a hand in the kitchen." The woman came through into the tea-room. Shelmerdine did not look round to see her.

"I'm sorry, Miss Perkins," said Dorothy quietly. "Another customer came in." There was not a hint of 'answering back' in her manner, just a very gentle, obedient politeness.

"Oh, I see," said Miss Perkins in a much pleasanter tone of voice. "Well, why didn't you say so?"

She walked over to Shelmerdine, smiling pleasantly; but as she came closer her mouth hardened again. "I'm very sorry, miss," she said, "but we're closed." "Closed?" protested Shelmerdine gently, "but..."

"Closed. You can go to Scodger's Cafe down the road. He's still open, I dare say."

Shelmerdine rose to her feet. Not long ago, her manner would have been withering in the extreme. Today it was the very soul of mildness.

"I am so sorry," she said gallantly. "I shall leave forthwith. Please accept my apologies for the inconvenience caused by my misunderstanding." It was clear that she was not in the least intimidated, merely anxious to be polite. Miss Perkins was almost charmed into changing her mind; but there was something in Shelmerdine's manner that she did not trust, something made her suspect that she was being mocked or at any rate humoured, and she refused to be charmed, but just stood there, her thin mouth expressing a mixture of awkwardness and grim resolution.

Shelmerdine stepped out again onto the sunny street. Her subtle perception told her what it was that had hardened Miss Perkins' heart against her charm; yet curiously enough, Miss Perkins had been wrong. Shelmerdine had not been laughing at her, though it is true that she had been seeing her very much as a spectacle, an example of a type or a tendency. Her gentle compliance had not been merely an attempt to charm, but was prompted by a sort of sympathy that was new to her, by a feeling that this world held so much that, even when it was offensive, was also delicate and precious; so much that she hardly dared touch in case it should be bruised and should vanish away into the black chaos of her own age. It was absurd, of course. Miss Perkins was far too solid for Shelmerdine to harm, and yet—

"I say, don't go to Scodger's."

The voice behind her was Dorothy's.

"Sorry?"

"Don't go to Scodger's. It isn't at all a nice place. I really cannot think why Miss Perkins suggested it."

"Thank you for the tip," said Shelmerdine. "Where do you think I might go?"

"Well—at this time of day—Look, I really can't stop now. Miss Perkins will be calling for me. If you wander down past the station, I'll join you in a quarter of an hour."

"But—"

The girl was already half-way back to the tea-shop door. "It's all right. I shan't worry if you're not there."

Shelmerdine was there; half-lying on the river-bank, floating wisps of grass downstream. Dorothy was

rather more than a quarter of an hour, Miss Perkins having kept her. She arrived, looking demure and a little overheated, in white gloves and a small-brimmed straw hat.

"Hello," she said, shyly. She seemed pleased, surprised, and perhaps a little overwhelmed to find Shelmerdine waiting for her.

"Hello," replied Shelmerdine comfortably. "I've just lost my blouse on that yellow wispy-looking stalk there. Look at it. It's practically standing still, the nag."

Dorothy smiled a little awkwardly. She felt rather shocked at this boyish line of talk with its race-track overtones. She did not feel able to join in, and yet she did not want to put off her new friend.

"You can't really afford to lose your blouse, can you?" she said.

Shelmerdine felt a little embarrassed herself. It was a sweet, rather novel feeling. "I suppose I am a shade under-dressed."

"Yes. That is why Miss Perkins would not serve you, of course. 'Coming here in her shirt-sleeves' she said—does a girl have 'shirt-sleeves', do you think?—'with no hat and no gloves. What does she think this is? The 20th century?' I say, are you in trouble? Are you a runaway or something?"

A little close for comfort. Had she somehow taken the schoolgirl tag with her even after leaving Granchester? Had the rôle gone deeper than she imagined?

"What makes you think so?"

"Well, I don't know. You just seem so unusual. You make me think of Huckleberry Finn or some one, lying here with no hat or gloves floating straws down the river. You might almost have one in your mouth."

"Or even in my hair?"

"Oh no! Please don't think I meant anything like that. Any one can see that you are well bred and entirely *compos*—but, well, that's what makes it odd, don't you see? Anyway, it's absolutely none of my business. I don't mind a bit if you don't want to tell me anything. I should like to be friends, though."

"I can tell you the truth if you really want to know. You may find it rather hard to believe, though."

"Oh, do tell me!" the girl's eyes shone. Her whole heart yearned for the romantic and the extraordinary.

"It is curious," said Shelmerdine, "that Miss Perkins should have mentioned the 20th century, because that is exactly where I *have* come from. I am a traveller in time." It was the first time she had told any one this since the day of her arrival, and it seemed some-

how curious to be telling the truth—it seemed almost like a lie.

"I say, *really*?"

"Absolutely."

"Well, of course, the 20th century wasn't all bad. There were quite decent people and things right up to the 1950s, they say."

"Well, I haven't come from the 1950s. I have come from the absolutely worst part of the century."

"Golliwogs! Was it really as bad as they say?"

"I am not wholly sure what they *do* say about it in your time, but if they say it was insane and poisonous; against everything good and beautiful and for everything evil and ugly, then they couldn't be righter."

"How ghastly! So what are you doing? Staying here or going back?"

"I couldn't go back if I wanted to—I have no means of travel now that I am here—unless you have invented time machines."

"Time machines—oh, no. Where are you going to stay?"

"At the moment I am not sure."

"Have you any money?"

"Half a crown."

"Well that won't last you long. Half a crown isn't worth as much now as it was in your day. Or is it worth more? I never can remember these things. Can you spend a late-20th-century half-crown here? I don't think I've ever seen one. Didn't they change the money or something?—Of course, you wouldn't know, would you? Sorry. I'm getting excited. But look, you'd better stay with us—I mean mother and me. You will, won't you? Just for tonight at any rate."

"I should be delighted, but—"

"But you mustn't tell mother any of this. She wouldn't believe it. Well, she might, actually. She does believe in fairies and things. But if you would just let me manage things and tell her in my own good time—would you mind that? You won't have to tell any fibs, of course, and I shan't either. Just let me do the talking. Will that be all right?"

"Certainly." Shelmerdine was taken aback at how voluble this shy little girl had become.

"Of course, Miss Perkins would never believe it at all. We mustn't ever tell her. She is very *down to earth*. Every one says that and they mean it as a compliment, but I shouldn't like to be *down to earth*, would you? One misses so much if one is always looking at the ground. I should have missed you—but I knew as soon as I saw you that you were something special. Miss Perkins only thought ... did you like Miss Perkins?"

"Yes, in a sort of way I rather did."

"I am so glad. She's much nicer than she seemed, really. I thought you could tell. That is what I mean. You can see the good in Miss Perkins, but Miss Perkins cannot see the good in you. That is the difference between being *down to earth* and not being, isn't it?"

Shelmerdine considered the matter. "Perhaps it is. I certainly don't think I *should* have seen the good in her before I started time travelling. I suppose it broadens the mind."

"But I don't even know your name. I had better know it if I am to introduce you to mother."

"Shelmerdine Bingham."

"Such a distinguished-sounding name. I wish mine were more distinguished. My name is Dorothy Bright."

"Bright is a charming name, and it matches your nature."

"It does at the moment. I wish it always did. I am quite dull sometimes. I do need things to *happen*. When nothing happens I often imagine things. I wish I could afford to go to films more; but I love some of those stories on the wireless. I especially love *Children of the Dawn*; don't you adore that? And even the newspapers. I mean, what do you think about Ruritania?"

"The last I heard it was in a state of civil war after the collapse of Communism there, but then I am a quarter of a century out of date."

"Oh, of course. Well, lots has happened since then. There was a royalist revolution—they happened in lots of countries—and the king was splendid. He really put the country back on its feet. Then there was his son who was assassinated and the country was taken over by the Democratic Committee whom nobody likes. But the really exciting part is that there is a young queen, about twelve years old, and nobody knows where she is—I mean, I suppose some people do, but it is being kept a secret because a lot of people think it was the Democratic Committee who assassinated the king and that they would assassinate her too, if they could find her. Anyway, the rumour is that she is terribly clever for her age and will be coming back to rule the country any time now. Every one wants her back and the committee could not stop her if she really was fit to rule, so their secret agents are going mad trying to find her and assassinate her before it is too late. Don't you think that is wonderfully romantic?"

"It might be a bit trying for the queen."

"Oh, yes. I say, when I look at you I can't help wondering—"

"Do I look twelve?"

"No, but they say she is very advanced for her years."

"I afraid not. I am just a plain old common or garden time-traveller."

"And then there are the cat-people."

"Who are they?"

"Well, hardly any one believes this, but I do. They say there is a sort of shamanistic cult in Ruritania: tribes who have a cat for their totem animal. That bit is true, definitely. But they say some of them have superhuman powers, they have the agility of cats and in a way they almost *are* cats. They are the best assassins in the world. That is how they got at the king. What do you think of that?"

"Well, I suppose I have known too many strange things myself to be entirely sceptical."

"Oh *good*. Miss Perkins says it is poppycock. It will be such fun having a friend who believes all these things. There is the most wonderful wireless programme on tonight. *Lady Carleon Investigates*. It is all about a lady detective who investigates the most terrifying mysteries. There is always an air of supernatural mystery about them, although there is usually a natural explanation in the end. I hate natural explanations, don't you? But then they often have a sort of double-twist where they suggest there might have been something really supernatural after all. Just a tiny scene or a few words at the end that make you shiver all over. You have never heard our wireless have you?"

"No," said Shelmerdine. Wireless was not much encouraged at Granchester.

"Oh, I say, we are home already. The walk always seems so long when I do it by myself."

Mrs. BRIGHT was a sweet if slightly careworn-looking creature. Shelmerdine had wondered a little what sort of reception she would have, being presented, without preface as it were, with a demand for board and lodging. Had she been visiting royalty she could hardly have expected a kinder reception.

"Shelmerdine. How lovely to see you dear. I am so sorry you cannot get home tonight. Will you mind sharing a room with Dorothy? I am afraid it is all we have."

"What a sweetie your mother is," said Shelmerdine, gazing out of the window of Dorothy's neat but tiny bedroom into a mean little brick yard. "I almost felt as if she thought she knew me."

"Oh, she is so vague about my friends—not that I have brought any friends home for ages now."

"Why not?"

"I don't know. When I stopped going to Grammar school I lost touch with most of the girls——"

It seemed a curious house for a family like Mrs. and Miss Bright. They were obviously of quite good stock, yet they were living in a tiny terraced house in a part of town that was positively low. The house itself was charmingly kept, and a few items told clearly of better times.

"I have told you the truth about me. Why don't you tell me the truth about you—it might make you feel better."

"The truth about me? What do you mean? I am not a time-traveller or anything. I only wish I was."

"Don't wish that. You could easily find a worse time than this one."

"I suppose so, only——"

"Only what?"

"You want to know the truth? Why we live in this dreadful place where I can't bear to invite any one? Why I have to work in Miss Perkins' shop instead of mother and me having a tea shop of our own as we wanted? Well, it isn't interesting at all. My daddy was killed in the war. We had a war, you know, a few years ago, to get free from the European Union. You may have heard of it. It was short but nasty. Anyway, he was killed in the first month and our house was bombed about half-way through. My brother and sister died and we've never been able to get back on our feet. That's all there is to it. Nothing romantic, nothing fascinating; just death and poverty. I was only able to ask some one as—well—decent as you here because you were in trouble, and I know you won't stay long. I can tell you are just moving on to more interesting things. Well, I wish I was."

Shelmerdine smiled. "You know, you are much more romantic than you give yourself credit for, Miss Bright. I find you romantic, and I have been about a bit."

"Really?"

"Certainly. And the circumstances of your misfortune, while they may not be unusual are certainly not commonplace. It is no mean thing to have died or to have suffered for your country's freedom. My people threw it away, or stood cravenly by while others threw it away, scarcely daring to murmur against them. Your people have fought and won it back. You are a fine and a heroic people: not least you, Miss Dorothy Bright. I hope one day I shall call myself one of you."

Tea was a curiously nursery affair. Mrs. Bright saw Dorothy and her friends very much as children. No doubt this was another reason she felt unable to invite any one, but it certainly made the harbouring of itinerant time-travellers a much less complicated process than Shelmerdine had been expecting. The

meal began with plain bread and butter. Mrs. Bright believed that children should begin tea with plain bread and butter, partly as a result of the new attitude to children which reacted strongly against the over-indulgence of the late 20th century with its pop culture and packaged snacks and partly for reasons of economy. However, there were small sandwiches of fish paste, and bread and jam to follow. Shelmerdine sensed that this was a rather festive meal put on for her benefit, and felt genuinely touched.

After tea they turned on the wireless set for *Lady Carleton Investigates*. It was a fascinating entertainment, in many ways far more ingenuous than the television and wireless programmes of Shelmerdine's day, and somewhat stilted (not so much bad acting as a reflection of the more precise and restrained mannerisms of real people in these days), yet the play was much more intelligent and tightly plotted, and containing many references and clever turns of phrase which would have been far above the heads of a late-20th-century audience. Above all, one was struck by the *sensibility* of the play, deep and subtle themes—supernatural mystery touching almost on philosophy, the subtle magic of the central character, her innate nobility, her delicate femininity, her intelligence and tact and profound, neo-romantic perception of the subtle *nuances* of the deep things she was investigating.

Dorothy was utterly rapt; Shelmerdine, who could never avoid a pose even if she had wished to, struck an attitude more rapt even than Dorothy's, and more than half felt it. Mrs. Bright sat quietly knitting, appreciating the play and appreciating the children's appreciation of it.

After the play came some light music, and the company talked happily. Mrs. Bright was amusing and mildly clever, though she mixed references to the living and the dead, to Dorothy's childhood and her present life, with a freedom which suggested that she did not fully distinguish the past from the present. Shelmerdine realised that another aspect of Dorothy's worry must be the question of whether she could really have a life of her own with her mother to be taken care of.

By half-past ten Mrs. Bright was suggesting bed. "School tomorrow, Dorothy. Mustn't stay up too late."

Dorothy flushed excessively. "Work, Mummie."

"Of course, work. I expect Shelmerdine must be at school too. You get undressed, Dorothy. I want a little word with Shelmerdine."

Dorothy left the room. Mrs. Bright turned to her guest. "It has been very pleasant having you here

tonight. Dorothy has told me a little of your predicament, and I just wish to tell you that you are welcome to stay under this roof as long as you need to. It isn't much of a roof, but such as it is, it is yours."

"I am more than grateful," said Shelmerdine.

"Grateful for the kind thought," said Mrs. Bright.

"Yes," said Shelmerdine, "for that of course, and..."

"Oh, I can read you, Miss Bingham. You are not the waif-and-stray sort. You can look after yourself better than most girls. You are not *dependent* on my hospitality as many in your position would be. I say that because I want us to be clear as to your position. If you stay you are a welcome guest, here because you want to be here and because we want to have you."

"That is very gallant of you."

Mrs. Bright smiled. She was really very pretty and quite young. Sometimes her air of confusion made her seem old, but her confusion was only of the surface, and really she was a girl.

"Gallant"—a curious compliment to pay a lady, but quite a charming one. You are very charming, Miss Bingham. Dorothy told me what you said about her father and herself being heroes, and it was quite lovely of you; loveliest of all because it was true, but a truth so few people can see. You are good for Dorothy, Miss Bingham. You could help her a great deal. I do not mean to make you feel any obligation, but if you do feel you can be a friend to her, I hope you will."

"Thank you. I take that as a very great compliment."

"You do not commit yourself. I like that. It is too easy to commit oneself lightly after such an appeal. Think it over. Get to know us a little better. I think we could be good for you too. I know the place you have come from."

"Well, good night, Shelmerdine."

"Good night, Mrs Bright."

Dorothy was in her nightdress, kneeling by the bed saying a prayer when Shelmerdine arrived. For such a sensitive girl, it was surprising what did *not* embarrass her. Was that her or the times?

Dorothy talked for a little while after they were in bed, but she was not a night-bird, and her chatter soon slowed down.

"I do hope you'll stay for a nice long time, Shelmerdine," were her last sleepy words.

"I hope so too," said Shelmerdine.  
But it was not to be.

The next morning dawned as sunny and bright as yesterday had been. Shelmerdine rose betimes and

washed and dressed quickly, as life at Granchester had trained her to do. The two girls came down gaily for boiled eggs and chatter. There was a great sense of freedom. Although Dorothy must rush off to work, the constant feeling of regulation that had been part of her life for the last little while was no longer there. Every minute was not allocated to some compartment. Talk did not have to be snatched between duties and compulsory silences. The wireless played a merry tune and Mrs. Bright was reading a newspaper: all seemed almost profligate liberty. Shelmerdine realised the extent of the regimentation to which she had become so fully accustomed.

“Anything about Ruritania?” asked Dorothy. Nothing else in the newspapers interested her.

“I fear not,” said Mrs. Bright, “but there is a most disturbing item, reminiscent, as Lady Bracknell might say, of the worst excesses of the late 20th century. A girl at one of our public schools has been shot.”

“Shot!” exclaimed Dorothy, “What school was it?”

“Granchester in Huntingdonshire.”

“Did you say Granchester?” asked Shelmerdine in a voice quite unlike her normal one.

“Yes, do you know it?”

“I did. What is the name of the girl?”

“Well, it will hardly mean anything to you, fortunately—but her name is Flavia Randall.”